



A Writing Portfolio
by Brittany Cole

*Sticky Fingers
Diner*

*

Sticky Fingers Diner

A Writing Portfolio

Written by Brittany Cole

*

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Buck and Nancy.....	2
Devin.....	8
Laurie and Joan.....	16
Ellis.....	25
Jimmy.....	33

Introduction

“Do you want to grab something to eat?”

As a server, I’ve spent a lot of time in restaurants over the past few years. The experience is complicated. The job entails more than just making the food someone pays for—it’s a social service, too. Even people who dine alone are subscribing to the social element of the restaurant; if the person did not want to be surrounded by people, they would have stayed home and cooked, or gotten take-out food. Even the quietest, sulkiest old man who dines out by himself in some way chooses to be a part of the social atmosphere; he may not want to speak with anyone, or anyone around him, but some part of him opts to have the hustle of human life stir about him.

Serving guests at a restaurant requires me to be receptive to their varying desires. I must be a guide for their experience as well as sort of a mind-reader. Some people, who take life more slowly, are very curious about my life and my views, and readily open a conversation between us; I am always happy to get to know guests and their stories, and once they find out I’m a writer, some like to tell me their own stories. Other guests don’t even consider my humanity, and they are just there to eat and converse with their company; this isn’t as pleasant for me, but it’s understandable. I feel out the different pulses of tables and chime in or disappear as I intuit.

This skill makes me realize how complex people’s relationships are to restaurants. Because part of my job is feeling out my role at the table—if I should be more present or less present—I have an intimate understanding of what services the restaurant provides for people.

For example, the restaurant may be something new for someone—a first-time experience, out of the norm. Or, it may be a familiar scene—a comforting environment, providing enjoyable food and friendly servers. Maybe it’s a part of a memory to a pair of friends who once frequented it long ago, or it’s an active part of a person’s routine. And then, for people like me, it’s where some spend so much of their time—good and bad—that it’s essentially a second home. The restaurant takes care of me—it feeds me not only because it cooks meals for me, but also because it provides a paycheck for me.

And so, having seen how the restaurant stretches and constricts—breathing in and out, inhaling and exhaling throughout the day’s rushes—I came to see it as its own creature, and filled with humans with all sorts of perspectives and mentalities, all drawn to this entity for a pilgrimage of survival, because food, more than merely a social activity, is also a necessity for life. The complexity compounds!

I’ve had a staunch conservative and a radical liberal sit back-to-back at different tables. But the complexities that physically sit side-by-side are also nestled within each of us. How can we feel two radically different ways? Both delighted and melancholy? Both restless yet comfortable? My goal with these stories was to illustrate the multitude of veins that pump through a restaurant, and the conflicting emotions we experience as human.

Welcome to Sticky Fingers Diner. As I so often say after delivering a plate of food to a table, “Enjoy.”

Buck and Nancy

Monday morning at 7:30 A.M., Buck and Nancy walked up Felter Street and through the doors of Sticky Fingers Diner. It was a zany little restaurant, cluttered at the host stand, piles of papers, pens, and clipboards stacked next to the menus and the silverware bin, the chocolate brown paint worn down to the wood at the edges, and a wraparound counter capped the end of the server line that ran along the side of the restaurant. The counter was bright orange linoleum with cheap barstools, and was surrounded by three booths wedged in the corner by the windows; the counter was also cluttered, the spaces not directly in front of barstools being occupied by a small pastry display case, a tea rack, a cup filled with straws, sugar caddies, a register, and a framed blurry photograph of one of their dishwashers—Mike—who notoriously hated cheese eating a grilled cheese at their employee Christmas party three years ago. The walls of the restaurant were lime green, with one accented brown wall, adorned by canvas paintings of animated diner food. The guest favorite was a painting of a giant hamburger that was made up of smaller food items, such as a chocolate milk carton, red peppers, zucchini, rice, and a can of baked beans, to name a few.

Nancy headed to a table in the front of the restaurant by the large windows and sat herself while Buck grabbed two silverware rollups from the host stand. The opening server waved at them from where she stood by the Pepsi machine behind the server line and Buck took a seat across from Nancy. Thirty seconds later, the opening server walked over to their table with two white mugs of steaming coffee and two glasses of ice water.

“The usual?” the waitress asked.

Nancy smiled and gave a pert nod.

“I’ll have what passes for usual,” Buck said, pulling out his newspaper from where it was tucked in his armpit and opening it over the table.

“All righty,” the waitress said, and she walked off towards the computer to put in their order.

The restaurant at this hour was mostly unoccupied. Sticky Fingers Diner opened at 7:00 A.M. on weekdays, and until 9:00 A.M., there was one server and one cook. Roxanne, the opening server, only had two other tables that Monday morning—a man in work boots and a white shirt spattered with dried green

paint, and a young sleepy couple in sweatpants. Roxanne was a middle-aged woman who had been serving at Sticky Fingers for eight years, and had been serving around town for fifteen years. Roxanne was rough around the edges, but her gruff charm fit the quirky diner, and she had become a favorite of many customers. She was Sticky Fingers' prized server, and she could handle a full Sticky Fingers dining room by herself.

The restaurant was not full at 7:34 A.M., though, where Buck and Nancy sat at their table sipping their black coffees and reading. This was their routine. Buck always brought the day's issue of *The Plain Dealer* with him, and Nancy brought whichever book from her personal collection spoke to her that day—today it was a nonfiction account of women's fashion in the 1860's.

Buck and Nancy always sat at the same booth: the corner booth in the front nook of the restaurant. The two walls the table abutted had large windowpanes, and this Monday morning the sky was streaked pink and orange, small gray clouds scattered across. Cars streamed by as they rushed through the intersection just down the road from the diner, and every few moments Nancy would look up and watch them zoom by silently from within the restaurant. Quickly the pink and orange sky was fading into a light blue, as the early morning shadows lifted from their resting spots.

"Did you hear back from Dex yet?" Nancy asked, interrupting their silence.

Buck lowered his newspaper. "He responded, but it would have been just as well if he hadn't because he didn't say anything we didn't already know."

Nancy sighed quickly. "I just need to know if he's coming to repair the couch today or not."

Buck shrugged heavily and curled his bottom lip outward in an utter display of "I don't know" and Nancy bit the inside of her cheek, eyes wandering away to the window.

Buck was a man who spoke in a very deliberate way. He drew his words out slowly, but enunciated them gorgeously with his low baritone voice. It was likely he came to speak so carefully because he had horrendous hearing problems; without his hearing aid, he was basically deaf. But it was perhaps more probable that he spoke that way because he was a man of few words, often articulating his responses through dramatic shrugs or head scratches, emphatic head shakes or kind smiles. It was ironic

that he was a professor of economics at Bentley University across town, but the independent research work he did in the department was what kept him teaching.

He was a tall man and walked with a slouch, so his belly jutted out and his neck hung forward. Buck's nose was large and strong, and gave him an adorably goofy face. Although he was a little more robust around the middle, he had a slender face and surprisingly few wrinkles, except for the bags beneath his eyes. He also still retained his hair, which he kept closely cut to his head.

In the distance of the restaurant, a bell sounded, and Roxanne—who was refilling the worker man's cup of coffee—headed over to the kitchen's expo window.

“You're meeting with Dr. Hartley after class today?” Nancy asked, turning to Buck and breaking away from her thoughts.

“I am,” Buck replied from behind his newspaper.

Roxanne approached their table with two plates of food and the coffee refill pot.

“Devin hooked you folks up with some mighty fine toast today,” Roxanne said of the cook as she set down their plates in front of them. She began filling their emptied coffee mugs. “The eggs look lackluster but I think he's having a rough morning.” She chuckled a little.

Buck folded up his newspaper and set it down next to him on the table while Nancy agreed that her eggs looked a little more medium than she would have cared but ultimately Nancy wasn't the kind of person to waste adequately edible food, and so Roxanne left them to eat.

Most mornings, Buck's “usual” was three scrambled eggs, two strips of turkey bacon, and one slice of wheat toast, and Nancy's “usual” was two over medium eggs, two sausage links, and one slice of dry wheat toast. Occasionally, Nancy would order oatmeal instead, or Buck would order pancakes, but more often than not the two ate the same meal every morning, prepared by Roy and served by Roxanne.

“Well, make sure you get home by six tonight. My sister is coming over and I shouldn't be trusted alone with her. I don't know anyone who can get blood out of white couch cushions.” Nancy spread grape jelly across her toast.

Buck paused and looked at Nancy with comically wide eyes.

“Oh yes,” Nancy said. “That’s today. I reminded you yesterday, and the day before that. Kelly is coming over at six.”

Buck went back to eating, shaking his head.

The couple made a funny pairing. Whereas Buck spoke very little and very slowly, Nancy was a classic chatty Cathy. She rattled off information nearly like a practiced auctioneer, and always had a story about her life to share with willing listeners. She was a short and round woman, who had the tendency to settle into herself. Her cheeks were frequently red, and she wore her short perm in a golden blond hue atop her head. She was known to be a little sarcastic, a trait that she picked up after decades of Buck’s incredibly sarcastic influence.

“You’ll be there though, right? Six o’clock.” Nancy sipped her coffee and set down the mug.

Buck was chewing and nodded.

Nancy’s sister and Buck didn’t dislike each other, but they certainly didn’t enjoy each other’s company. Of course, Nancy and her sister didn’t get along too well, either, but they were sisters and had spent their entire lives battling between their personalities. Kelly was quite different than Nancy, and perhaps her most irritating characteristic was her tendency to be a contrarian. For every thought uttered by Nancy, Kelly had something to say against it, which is what Buck found most challenging to endure about her. However, if Buck had known more about Kelly’s feelings, he may have wholly disliked her—unbeknownst to Buck, Kelly felt that Nancy had made a mistake in marrying Buck. “He’s too self-absorbed and closed off,” she had once told Nancy, when they were young women. “You need someone who’s more like you.” Nancy had shut Kelly’s criticisms down immediately, and ever since that talk, Kelly had kept her feelings to herself, although she did a poor job of disguising her attitude with her eye-rolls and somewhat condescending tones of voice.

Buck and Nancy finished their meals at approximately the same time as the other. They both cleared their plates, and Nancy wiped her mouth with a napkin and crumpled it, setting it on her plate. She nudged the plates to the end of the table as Buck picked up his newspaper and resumed reading it.

The total of their bill would be \$19.91. Buck would pay in cash and tip Roxanne \$3.09. For the same price, Buck and Nancy could buy groceries to cook this very same meal at home for the entire week. Yet they continued to walk to Sticky Fingers Diner from their apartment to sit down at that table to order breakfast every single morning.

It was for the sake of their relationship. They had been married for forty-seven years, yet the longevity of their relationship depended on rituals like Sticky Fingers. You see, communication between men and women can be a difficult course to navigate. Buck communicated minimally, and yet Nancy operated at a very high-communication rate. Over the years, Nancy came to understand that Buck was most conversational in the morning, when his brain was fresh and mood untarnished by exterior factors, and that he was least talkative at the end of the day, after he had been worn out from work and the day's stimuli. So Nancy began scheduling most of her necessary conversations with Buck for the morning—the day's events, upcoming plans, talk of bills and relatives' news—all the "business" talk she saved for the morning.

More than that, though, Buck wore his hearing aid when they ate out at Sticky Fingers. When the two were at home, it was more comfortable for Buck to pop out his hearing aid, where he wouldn't have to converse with people unaware to his hearing challenges. This was problematic when Nancy tried talking with him though—he would have to read her lips, sometimes at the cost of comprehending what she said. Buck asked "What?" a total of two times before he gave up and accepted that he just wouldn't be able to hear or understand what someone was saying. So Nancy found that there were some major communication problems when he wasn't wearing his hearing aid.

Sticky Fingers was the compromise. It was admittedly nice not to have to make breakfast every morning, or brew coffee on their own. Here, they could be waited on and relieve some of the stress of cooking. And some days, breakfast was the only opportunity Nancy had to leave the apartment and interact with someone other than Buck.

Within a few minutes, Roxanne was scooping the empty plates up and dropping off the bill.

“Want a cup for the road?” she asked Nancy. Buck drank his two cups of coffee in-house, but Nancy’s coffee-drinking habits varied and sometimes she took a to-go coffee with her.

Nancy considered. “Mmmm, yes. I think I will have one today.”

The bell rang across the restaurant and Roxanne left them again.

Outside, the sky had transformed into a brilliant blue. The world basked in the young daylight, and traffic picked up. Roxanne returned with a Styrofoam cup full of coffee and a few minutes later, Buck was done with his newspaper at 7:57 AM. He was reliable. Nancy loved that about him.

The two scooted out of their booth, Nancy standing up after pulling herself up out of the booth, and they hobbled out of Sticky Fingers Diner and down Felter Street, Buck’s tall, pear-shaped figure falling into perfect step next to Nancy’s short, round shape, and in the early hours of daylight that morning—just as every morning—it were as if they had been walking side-by-side forever, in their easy, passionless stride.

Devin

“Are you kidding me?” I sigh and curse the eggs that are now splattered across the floor. That’s just my luck. I’ve been working here for five years and this shit still happens way too often. I grab two new eggs and crack them one in each hand over the pan. It’s too early to be dealing with these stupid eggs. I leave the ones on the floor because I’m annoyed with them.

I flip these eggs all right, and after a minute I plate them, sliding them out of the pan and onto a round plate. The dude who ordered these eggs comes in every day and always gives us a hard time about his eggs being really, really over easy. I call him “OE Man” because of how specific he is about his eggs but I think his name is actually Barry—I’m not sure; the servers talk about regulars all the time and I don’t really ever see the customers so it’s hard to tell who’s who.

OE Man gets hash browns and sourdough with his eggs today, and they’ve all got me trained enough to know that while we usually put all that stuff on one plate, OE Man likes his toast separate. It doesn’t really matter to me, I just do what the ticket tells me.

I set the plates in the expo window and ring the bell, and Roxanne heads over so she can run the food. That was the only ticket I had, so I stand in front of the hot grill and pull out my phone to check Twitter.

After scrolling through Twitter for a few minutes—people on Twitter are wild, I’m busting up at some of the crazy things people post—I hear a ticket printing so I put my phone back in my pocket and sigh. Same shit, different day. Scrambled eggs, wheat toast, hash browns, and bacon. I’ve made this meal a thousand times. Another ticket prints—dammit Roxanne, I hate it when servers send back two tickets at the same time. I guess it’s not a big deal but shit’s still annoying.

The second ticket is over medium eggs, wheat toast, hash browns, and ham. I feel like nobody ever gets ham; people always want bacon. Well, not just bacon but crisp bacon. All these bitches want crisp bacon.

The eggs look kind of whack, like the white parts all folded under and a little over-cooked, but I plate both orders and set them in the expo window at the same time. “Roxanne,” I say with minimal gusto

and ring the bell, and she walks over to the window from the nearby server station in the back of the dining room. She mutters something about them when she comes to pick up the plates, but she can talk all the shit she wants about my eggs because they're just eggs.

I'm bored back here. I look around the kitchen and wonder what it's like not to smell like grill all the time. I spend way too much time at this grill, in this room with the ugly rust-colored tiles I'm sick of staring at and the meat slicer that's always getting jammed. Then there's the burner unit, which people are always heating things up on and then forgetting about so the soup or whatever ends up making the whole kitchen stank and getting crusty all over the pans. And no one ever puts anything where it should go because we can't hang on to dishwashers, so all the new bloods don't know where things go and I gotta go find it. There's always something.

I pull out my phone again because I don't feel like doing anything else. My manager Dave asked me to get some prep done this morning, but I've still got a few hours and I think it's messed up that I have to do all the cooking and all the prep by myself and only get paid the same. I have a notification, and it's my girlfriend—she texted me asking if I'd drive out to her place tonight.

I sigh and roll my eyes. Jesus, if it's not one thing it's another. I was going to hit up my younger brother after work and see if he wanted to work on this documentary I've been trying to get filmed but I guess I'm gonna have to end up driving all the way out to Granger this evening, which is basically an hour away. I'm annoyed so I shove my phone back in my pants and grab my Styrofoam coffee cup off the grill vent hood ledge and take a few sips. Not much is going on out in the dining room, and I just stare blankly through the window at it, straight down the restaurant to the front door.

Every time I try to get together with any of the guys to work on this documentary, something comes up. My friend Alex is the one who has the equipment to film and record it, and I'm having my brother Jamal do the narration for it, and it just sucks because they're always dipping out or shit like this comes up where I have to hang out with my girlfriend. I mean, she's cool and all, and we've been dating for a few years so we're pretty committed I guess, but I'm trying to make it in the film industry but it's hard when I spend all my time at Fingers, sweating my ass off in front of this grill.

The documentary is about the Black Lives Matter movement here in Jordan. I've lived in Jordan my whole life, and it's a pretty liberal city, but there's still mostly white people and so the documentary is from mine and my brother's perspectives and how it's like being a black man trying to change the system locally when it feels like there's really nothing we can do here for it. Anyway, I've been trying to work on it for like a year now and things keep falling through for it and I only have a few clips here and there.

I pull my work shirt away from my chest to get some air between the cloth and my skin. The work shirt is only a red t-shirt, but I sweat a lot anyway. The latex gloves I'm wearing are humid inside and stick to my hands. A ticket prints and I'm back to throwing down bacon and putting bread in the toaster.

Just as I'm about to plate this ticket, another ticket prints. I'm gonna plate this first, though. I flop it all on the plate but as I turn away from the grill to set it in the window, my shoe slides on something gooey and the toast slides off the plate onto the floor. It's the eggs I dropped earlier. Dammit!

I sigh, and angrily plop the ceramic plate onto the cutting board, and grab a new piece of bread to set in the toaster. Now another ticket prints. Great. I pull them out of the ticket printer and straighten them out because the paper in the machine is starting to curl. Must be near the end of the roll.

This ticket's a four-top, and the next one is a three-top. A couple of them order lunch items, so I have to go around the corner of the kitchen and grab chicken breasts and turkey out of the walk-in cooler because whoever closed last night didn't stock the reach-in cooler next to the grill. It's nice and cold in the walk-in, the cold air blowing on my moist skin, so I take my time finding the chicken, which also isn't where it's supposed to be... By the time I come back to the grill, another ticket has printed. I start working on the four-top ticket, and a few minutes later I remember the toast I sent through the toaster that's probably been ready for a little while now.

"Is table three's food ready yet?" Roxanne calls through the expo window in her husky voice, and I say, "Yeah, just a second," to the toast I'm cutting and setting on the plate. I turn around with it, making sure not to step on the splattered eggs. She reaches through and takes it from my hand instead of letting me set it down in the window and I get back to the grill.

The ticket printer goes off again. “Are you serious,” I mumble. Where the hell is Dave? I could use some help. I shouldn’t have to be the only person cooking right now. We’re so understaffed right now that they’re having me work so many hours this week and I’m almost always the only cook. I throw down some hashbrowns from the plastic container sitting on the shelf next to the grill and pour a couple pancakes onto the grill from the pancake mix pitcher. I hear another ticket printing, and then it suddenly stops and starts beeping—crap, that means it’s out of paper. I round the corner and walk past the walk-in cooler to the dry stock room, where receipt paper is on the top shelf above my head. I get back to the printer and change the paper, tossing the empty plastic tube from the old roll into the trash.

“Hey Roxanne!” I shout her name this time because I’m irritated enough to be more energetic about it. Her head pops into the expo window. Roxanne’s crazy—she’s probably forty-six years old and she just doesn’t give a shit about anything, yet she’s the best at her job. She’s got this fluffy, frizzy grayish hair that’s kinda dyed dark brown, and a bunch of wrinkles around her face, probably because she smokes so much. Probably the bluntest person I know. A lot of the other servers are scared of her, but I’m used to her.

“Huh?” she asks nasally.

“Can you reprint that last one?” I say, flipping the pancake and seeing that the one side cooked too long so it’s dark brown. Oh well.

“Print it again?” She sounds like she’s trying to give me a hard time about it even though I’m pretty sure it’s not that deep. She pulls out of the window and the printer reprints the ticket.

The rest of the rush kind of goes like this. Dave eventually walks by on his way to the manager’s office—I bet he was out back smoking—and I catch him and ask him to hop on the line for a second with me. I take the right side of the grill, which includes the cutting board and the sandwich toppings station, and he takes the left side, which is also the burners we use for eggs. We knock out the rest of the tickets in probably twenty minutes because they keep printing. Finally we finish up and there’s a lull in the orders.

“Good now?” Dave asks. He doesn’t talk much, which is fine. He’s a dude who sort of looks like Orville Redenbacher, but doesn’t grin as much. Dave’s been kinda salty lately because he’s trying to hire

on more dishwashers and cooks but no one wants to work here, and the people who do never show up for the interviews or quit after two shifts. No one wants to work these days.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I mumble, and he silently heads off to the office. The office is literally a closet so I guess I get why he spends so much time outside smoking.

I take another swig of coffee and realize I have to pee really bad, and there’s still no tickets so I pull my apron off from over my head and hang it up on a peg beside the swinging door that leads to the dining room. I push through that door and turn right down a little hallway that has the bathrooms. The men’s bathroom is occupied and so I sigh and duck into the women’s bathroom right next to the men’s. We don’t have employee bathrooms so this kind of shit happens way too often.

I take my time getting back to the grill, texting in the bathroom after I’m done going. I’m trying to figure out when Alex and Jamal and I can work on this thing again. Not tomorrow, because I close here tomorrow, and the day after that I literally work all day. Dammit. I tried to work on it last night, but Alex never texted me back and apparently my brother was with a girl so I couldn’t do anything so I ended up watching Sons of Anarchy until I fell asleep.

I get back to the grill and there’s still no tickets. I guess it must have slowed down in the dining room too because Roxanne comes over and starts talking to me through the expo window. It’s crazy how everyone will come in at the same time and then we’ll have like nothing.

“How ya’ doin’ back there, Dev?” she asks, leaning on the stainless steel surface of the expo window. We’re not supposed to lean on it like that, but it’s Roxanne and she just doesn’t give a crap.

“Fine,” I mumble, walking over to the window and leaning against the wall next to it. Roxanne is short, so she’s barely tall enough to rest her arms on it like she does, but I have to slouch a little to see through it.

“How’s the film biz going?” she asks.

I shrug. “It’s not. Everyone’s sleeping on it. And I was gonna try to work on it tonight but Melanie wants me to come over,” I say, sighing and slouching.

Roxanne shakes her head at me. “Just tell her you can’t.”

“No, because I don’t want her to get all mad or something,” I say, exasperated, glancing at the grill and back at Roxanne. She’s frowning at me with her hard face.

“Bullshit,” she says. “Melanie will understand. You need to start getting serious about your film stuff.” She’s sounding all serious and parental.

“I’m trying,” I say, my voice rising. “But when I have to spend all my time here I can’t get around to working on it, and then when I do, something always comes up. It happens literally every time. This place is like crushing my soul.” I’m getting all heated and I look at that stupid burnt orange tile as I rub my forehead. I’m freaking frustrated.

“Honey, you need to move on from this place. Quit.” I go to say something, but she turns her head to the dining room suddenly and tells me to hang on over her shoulder.

I sigh and pull out my phone, checking Twitter again. Some celebrity called out some actor and everyone’s losing their minds over it, so all anyone’s tweeting is about that. I retweet some of the funny ones.

“You’re twenty-nine years old and you need to move on from this place,” I hear, and Roxanne is back at the window. “Seriously you should have quit a long time ago.”

I stick my phone back in my pocket and turn to the window again. “Yeah but now this place would literally fall apart without me.”

“You’ve been saying that for years, too!” Roxanne barks, and disappears again. I roll my eyes and a ticket prints, so I put my apron back on and pull on new gloves before grabbing the ticket.

“Remember when Yasmeen left?” Roxanne is practically shouting through the expo window so I can hear her over the grill vent. I look at her over my shoulder. “Everyone thought this place would go to ruin without a fourth manager, but we got through. If you leave, it’ll suck for a little, but you can’t stay here forever.”

She bounds off again, and the office door opens and Dave walks out, closing it behind him with a click. Shit, I hope he didn’t hear all that. The office is right next to the grill and no one can say anything in this restaurant without someone else overhearing it. He’s silent as usual as he stoically passes by me

and heads for the back door with his can of Dr. Pepper. Dave always brings his own Dr. Peppers. We don't even serve Pepsi products here.

The ticket's a couple of sandwiches, so I put together the lettuce, hot sauce, hummus, and Monterrey jack cheese this dude wants for his sandwich and the sprouts, peppers, and pepper jack cheese for the other one. The burgers sizzle on the grill and I press them with the spatula so they'll hopefully cook faster. I don't really think about the burgers, though; I think about what Roxanne said. I've actually been seriously considering quitting for a few months now. I just don't know if the restaurant would be able to handle it. Right now Vick and Sylvia are the only other cooks and Sylvia's in classes so her availability kind of sucks and Vick is still kinda new.

When Dave comes back through, twenty minutes later, from smoking—which I can smell even over the powerful stench of all the grease—he pauses behind me as I'm stirring some mac and cheese to pop in the microwave for a one-top ticket.

“I want to talk to you before you leave today,” he says, and I turn around to make sure he's talking to me. I'm about to ask him what about, but Penny—basically our only dishwasher right now, this ridiculously skinny white girl with crazy long brown hair—walks by us to clock in on the server computer in the dining room.

“Hey Dave!” she says, waving. “How are you?” she asks, and he says he's good and disappears into the office and Penny keeps walking to go clock in.

Shit, Dave probably did hear what Roxanne was saying. Roxanne has no ability to be discreet about anything. But if he brings that up, I don't know if I should be straight up with him about what's going on or if I should just say it's Roxanne trying to stir up drama like she sometimes does. Dave is a pretty silent dude but I've known him for a while now and he knows what's up with my dream of being a documentarist. But I don't know if he'd be upset with me for choosing to leave now. But Melanie's been wanting me to move in with her and I'm really not about to drive an hour to work every day.

I check my phone and my girlfriend texted me again: “If you do want to come over tonight, I can make us sushi! No worries if you have plans though.” Jamal also shot me a text: “Yo I'm free this

evening if you're down to work on the doc." I text my girlfriend, "Yeah that sounds cool," and then text my brother back and tell him I have to drive to Melanie's tonight. I put my phone back away with an eye roll.

I don't know if Roxanne's messing with me or not, but I'm actually thinking about what she said. My birthday's in a few months and I don't think I could stand being thirty and still working the same entry-level kind of job I've been at since I graduated college. Honestly I never thought I'd be here this long. It's kinda embarrassing.

"Pssst," I hear, and I turn around again to see Roxanne chilling at the expo window again. Even though her "pssst" was meant to be subtle, she's still Roxanne so it was loud. I walk away from the waffle fries I'm dropping into the fryer and go to the window.

"What?" I ask in a hushed voice.

She drops a bomb on me: "If you don't quit, I'll quit." Roxanne winks and grins mischievously, and bounds off to a table. I can hear her say loudly, "All right folks, what the heck would we like Devin to whip up for us today?" to a table. I stare at the dining room through the expo window, watching her talk to the customers. Then I shift my focus to the front window and squint to see the road in front of the restaurant, and the trees along the sidewalk. I spend the rest of my shift wondering what to say to Dave. I feel kind of salty at Roxanne for pressuring me to make this kind of decision so suddenly, but I'm also kind of wishing I was as brave as she is.

Laurie and Joan

“I’m meeting my friend, but I don’t think she’s here yet. She’s always the late one.” Laurie winked and adjusted the way she was holding the straps of her canvas tote bag.

The host of Sticky Fingers Diner grabbed two menus and two sets of silverware from the host stand and motioned for Laurie to follow. Laurie was escorted to a booth with a window view of the parking lot, a view mostly obstructed by an overgrown bush outside. The host disappeared as Laurie settled herself in the booth.

Laurie could only be described as a “sweet old lady” by most people who knew her. She had very white hair which she kept short with slightly sweeping bangs across her forehead. When she spoke, her voice was high-pitched and sweet, like how one would imagine a peach sounding.

The air conditioning vent above the booth was blowing directly on Laurie, and she pulled her jean jacket tighter around her. Shortly, her waitress—a tall, broad-shouldered blond—appeared and asked for Laurie’s drink order.

“Yes, hi, I’ll have a—do you have coffee? Yes, I remember you having very good coffee here—I used to live here, but it’s been a while, and you see, I’m very cold right now, so I could use a hot beverage, yes. Some coffee would be just wonderful.” Laurie, shoulders tense and raised, smiled at the waitress.

The waitress nodded and ran a hand through her ponytail which draped over her shoulder. “Sure. Do you want cream with it?” she asked loudly.

“Oh, yes, sweetie. Thank you.”

The waitress whisked away.

Laurie dug around in her bag and pulled out a red glasses case. She put on her reading glasses and then set her cell phone in front of her on the table, unlocking the smart phone with her index finger. She continued to use her index finger to navigate to her text messages, and then pulled up a thread of exchanges between her and her friend Joan.

“I am at Sticky Fingers now,” she typed, and sent it. She thought for a second, and then sent another text, “I’m at a booth by the window.”

By the time Laurie had finished that, her waitress had dropped off a mug of coffee and a little metal creamer pot filled with cream and whisked away again—but not before Laurie caught a glance of the waitress’s face, revealing a look of... pity? It was a look that Laurie had gotten used to; she liked it no more than the first time she saw it, but she was no longer thrown by it. It was a sort of loose frown, eyelids slightly squinted, a seemingly amused almost-grin. Everyone wore it a little differently, but the eyes themselves were always the same from person to person. It was the look you would don upon seeing a sick child play blissfully with their dolls. A look of endearing pity, a look that Laurie began noticing that people gave her around the time her hair began to glint white and the wrinkles starting to spread across her face.

Laurie nudged her phone out of the way and pulled the steaming cup of coffee towards her, wrapping her hands around the warm mug and taking a deep breath, forgetting about the waitress’s look, as she was able to do now with little effort. At first, Laurie was annoyed with how people looked at her as she became more “seasoned”; it felt so condescending, like being belittled. But when her hair bloomed fully white, she practiced letting go of her pride and accepted the fact of her aging, and the subtle looks people gave her along with it.

She looked around the restaurant contentedly, watching the waiters and waitresses bounce from table to table, watching the various customers—mostly middle-aged folk, but some college-age guests as well—eat and talk with their company, watching the door as new customers entered—none of them Joan though, not yet. It was a small restaurant, essentially one large room with a clear sight from front to back, and so Laurie easily became absorbed in the activity around her.

After about ten minutes of sipping coffee, checking the time on her phone, and finally pulling out a Better Homes and Gardens quilting magazine to flip through, Laurie finally caught Joan out of the corner of her vision and waved her over.

Joan herself was in the middle of telling the host, “My friend is supposed to be here...” while scanning the restaurant when she spotted Laurie, who looked up and waved her over at the same time. Their smiles found each other.

“There she is!” Joan said, more to herself than the host, as she immediately forgot about the host and went to meet Laurie, who quickly took off her reading glasses.

“Oh, hello!”

“Hi—oh it’s so good to see you!”

Whereas Laurie emitted all the typical “grandma” signifiers, Joan hid her age with a little more effort. Her hair had peppered many years ago, but she routinely dyed it brown and now cut it into what was called a pixie cut. She had a narrow frame and good posture, but the lines in her face and her slightly sagging cheeks revealed more than she could disguise.

Laurie stood and the two hugged for a moment. Joan was shorter and more petite than Laurie, so the pair was lopsided in stature but certainly not in spirit. They continued to smile at each other as they pulled away with satisfied sighs and shuffled down into the booth.

“How have you been?” Laurie asked, grinning at Joan.

“I’m good! I—I tried to text you,” Joan said, pulling her smart phone out of her purse and opening her text messages, “but they kept saying ‘Not Delivered,’ and—”

The waitress appeared again and interjected, directing her question at Joan. “Hi, can I grab you something to drink? Coffee?” Her eyes flitted down to Joan’s phone in hand and then back up to Joan.

As Joan answered, “Actually, you know, some iced tea would be nice,” Laurie watched the waitress give the same look to Joan upon overhearing her smart phone troubles. The look that conveyed a sense of amusement at how adorably maladjusted they were to this modern, youthful world. Laurie looked away, rested her eyes on the condiment caddy at the end of the table until the waitress bounded off. Laurie didn’t mind so much when she received that look, but it upset her to see Joan pitied that way. It meant Joan was getting older, too.

“Well, anyway,” Joan continued. “I don’t know why my texts aren’t sending. I was going to let you know I was running late but I guess you already know that now!” Joan giggled and dismissed her phone, tucking it back into her purse. “And how are you?” she asked, placing both hands face down on the table.

“Oh, yes, things are going really well. I—” Laurie paused as she took in Joan, sitting across from her so attentively. Joan did look older since the last time they saw each other—the creases around her eyes and mouth had spread—but Laurie thought the new haircut looked absolutely darling on Joan; it really allowed one to appreciate Joan’s high cheekbones and slender neck.

“I’m sorry; I lost my train of thought. Typical airhead me!” Laurie threw her hands up lightheartedly, and the two shared a giggle, an act which bound them across time and distance. Laurie and Joan were different in many regards—politically, for one—but what connected them was their love to laugh, and their willingness to laugh at themselves. Their laughs mingled in the air between them, just as they had when Laurie got a pen tangled in her hair on her wedding day and Joan had to untangle it, just as they had when Joan got toilet paper stuck to the bottom of her heels the night of their sorority’s formal, just as they had when they showed up to this same restaurant five years ago accidentally wearing the same purple and white striped t-shirt. Their laughs were familiar with each other, and resonated fuller and purer as they encouraged each other. And so by the end, they were not so much giggling at Laurie’s infamous forgetfulness, but giggling as tribute to all the joy they had shared over the years and the pleasure it was to be in each other’s company.

During this fit of giggles the waitress returned with Joan’s iced tea. Neither of the women was ready to order, so the waitress left them for a few moments so that they could glance at the menus, which sat before them on the table like placemats.

After more conversation and very little menu-glancing, the waitress returned and Laurie and Joan improvised their order on the spot, both settling for soup and sandwiches. She collected their menus and bounded off.

“So, how is Michael?” Joan asked, folding her hands together on the table.

“He’s much better,” Laurie replied, smiling. “After he got his knee replaced, it was like he was a whole new man! He’s able to get around so much better now.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Joan said, nodding. She took a drink of her iced tea.

“And he’s more active now, if you know what I mean.” Laurie grinned and raised her eyebrows.

The two began cackling together again. They had been best friends since college, when they were roommates and sorority sisters, getting into all sorts of shenanigans. While they were both relatively tame in their older years, as young women they had a bit of a mutual wild streak. They would drink too much and have too much fun with boys; they would help each other cheat on exams and sneak out past curfew. Laurie surprised people, and while she had always been a sweetheart, she was the wilder of the two; Joan rarely hesitated to get up to no good, but Laurie was arguably the “worse” influence of the pair. It was her secret pleasure.

Their fields of study during college were the same, which is what initially bonded them. Aspiring school teachers, the women understood each other’s desire to influence and guide young children. Back then, one could afford to be a little mischievous despite a desire to go into education—a permanent record of transgressions did not follow one so mercilessly as it does today. So the two dreamt of changing children’s lives while throwing back cans of beer at frat parties.

They did become school teachers, too. Laurie went on to teach art to elementary students, and Joan taught math to middle schoolers. Of course, their opportunities separated them, as Joan’s career removed her to Indiana while Laurie stayed in Ohio for another decade. It wasn’t until Michael, Laurie’s husband, got promoted in his job that Laurie quit teaching and followed him to Maine, before moving back to Ohio, by which time Joan had divorced her first husband and started living with her long-term boyfriend Rick in Pennsylvania and teaching science to sixth graders.

Over the decades, contact had been hard to maintain, but Laurie and Joan remained best girlfriends. Sticky Fingers Diner was a relatively new addition to their old college town, but they discovered it fifteen years ago and made a point to meet up there at least once every year.

Their soup and sandwiches came in the middle of a discussion about how fast their grandchildren were growing up.

“Amelia is already in middle school! She’s having trouble because the kids make fun of her for not shaving her legs. She and her mother are at odds because Candice says she’s too young to start shaving, but Amelia—oh! That was so fast!” Laurie startled as the waitress set down both their plates in front of them with a quiet thud.

“There you are! Anything else I can get you?” the blond asked loudly, her body was already careening away to move on to the next table.

Laurie and Joan looked around their table, hands raised, and after a moment turned to their waitress and replied, “Nope! No, everything looks good!”

The waitress was gone before they could finish and the pair gingerly began stirring their soups with the spoons that were sitting on the plate. Laurie had ordered chicken noodle soup and Joan the cheddar broccoli.

“Oh, this looks so good!” Joan said. She lifted a spoonful of her soup and blew on it.

“I just can’t decide what to eat first!” Laurie agreed, picking up her sandwich, chicken salad on a croissant. The next few moments were relatively quiet between them as they enjoyed the first tastes of their lunch.

“Mmmm, this chicken melt is delicious,” Joan said. “I’m going to have to remember to get this next time!” She wiped her hands on the napkin in her lap.

“It looks good!” Laurie replied, dabbing at her mouth with her own napkin and taking a sip of coffee.

Joan went back and forth between eating her sandwich and her soup, while Laurie eventually decided on eating her soup first and the rest of her sandwich second.

A few moments later while Laurie and Joan were both chewing, the waitress brought out food for the table next to them—two men in gray suits—and Joan eyeballed their plates: a heap of scrambled eggs, a side of wheat toast, and a slice of French toast.

“That looks amazing,” Joan commented.

“I forgot they served breakfast here!” Laurie said, also looking over at the men’s food.

Joan turned back to their own table and giggled. “Here we are, drooling over their food!”

“Oh!” Laurie said, giggling also. She was suddenly struck by a memory. “Oh, yes, Joan, do you remember...” Laurie set her hands on the edge of the table and leaned in towards Joan, “when we used to go to King’s Hot Cakes all the time? How bad were we!” During their sophomore year of college, Laurie and Joan had frequented King’s Hot Cakes, where pancakes were all-you-can-eat for \$3 on Wednesday nights. At the time, they could each eat nearly twenty apiece and regularly ate until they practically vomited.

Joan began giggling through the bite she was chewing, her mouth stretching into a tight smile. She rocked back and forth in delight until she swallowed. Laurie laughed as well, amused by how Joan had been caught up laughing while chewing.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to make you laugh while you were eating!”

Joan waved her hand and laughed aloud. “How did we eat so much and stay so skinny? Now I have a third of the appetite but weigh three times as much!”

“You? Oh baloney, you’re still tiny,” Laurie chided. She fit the last bite of her chicken salad sandwich into her mouth.

“Quick—I should make you laugh while you’re chewing!” Joan quipped, snapping her finger and smiling so wide her eyes squinted.

Laurie giggled and quickly finished chewing. “You bitch,” Laurie whispered, and the two fell into a delighted cackle. The table behind them, where two college students were seated, turned around wearily and smiled at the scene Laurie and Joan were making in their corner.

“Sounds like you two are having a good time over here,” the waitress commented as she appeared to collect their empty plates in front of them and drop off the checks.

“Oh, yes, we’re old friends,” Laurie said to the waitress, giving her a kind grin as a remnant from her laughing fit and setting her hand palm-down on the table. “What’s your name sweetie?”

“Rachel.” She stacked the empty soup bowls on each other and set those on the plates, picking them up.

“Well, Rachel, if you take care of your friends, they can last a lifetime,” Joan said, nodding, looking across the table at Laurie, then back up at Rachel.

“It’s true,” Laurie added, and reached her hand across the table to meet Joan’s cold hand.

“Well I’ll try,” Rachel replied loudly, giving a quick grin. “Have a good one, ladies!” she said, making her final disappearing act.

Laurie and Joan sat with their hands connected for another moment, smiling at the sight of each other. The restaurant buzzed around them, but they were so engrossed in each other that they hadn’t noticed all the general dining commotion—the servers darting around between tables, the hosts bussing dirty plates to quickly seat the table with new guests, the long ticket times. But when Laurie and Joan got together, their immediate surroundings tended to drift away as they laughed and bantered. No one quite understood them like they did each other. Part of it was their long, shared past, but another part of it was the way they bantered so easily.

Laurie wished, in that moment, that she and Joan were able to meet up more often. It was so refreshing to see Joan, to look at that familiar face, and to be looked at with genuine interest and care, because when Laurie and Joan looked at each other, they didn’t see old women. They didn’t see the white hair, the wrinkles, the bulging stomach, the sagging arm flab, the yellowed teeth. Laurie saw the spirit of Joan, hardworking and adventurous, and Joan saw the soul of Laurie, kind and jocular. It was almost as if they saw each other as though they were merely twenty years old again. Perhaps if they saw each other more frequently, the moment would not feel as special, Laurie thought. But how fulfilling it was to be looked at so lovingly. Back at home, their husbands and families certainly brought joy to their lives, but it was not quite the same as that mutual history and unspoken connection between best gal friends. Rick had the tendency to not look at the person he was talking to, and it annoyed Joan every day. Michael was a bit controlling, and didn’t like when Laurie made perverse jokes, which frustrated Laurie. Nothing was as effortless as Laurie and Joan together.

“I feel as though the past forty years have swept by me in an instant,” Laurie said quietly, looking down at the table. “I don’t know how we got to be so old all the sudden.” She looked up at Joan again, and found a sweet niche in Joan’s attentive brown eyes.

Joan nodded slowly, returning Laurie’s gaze. “I know. It seems like one day I just looked in the mirror and some old woman was staring back at me.”

Laurie squeezed Joan’s hand—they were still holding each other’s hands, and their palms had grown warm together. “Oh yes. I pray every day that we both live long lives. You’re always in my prayers.”

“You, too,” Joan said, giving a small smile. She slowly pulled back and sat up straight in her booth, looking at her phone beside her. “Well, I have an appointment with the chiropractor at one-thirty. I hate to go so soon, though. That darn time—always flying by too quickly.”

“Oh, I know,” Laurie whined, sitting up as well. “It’s just so good to see you.”

The two gathered up their belongings and started to take their receipts up to the register.

“Until next year,” Laurie said sadly as they stood beside their booth. She caressed the table, and then she and Joan had a laugh about the emotional parting with the booth.

“I hope Rick’s back surgery goes well,” Laurie said as the two hugged a bit later in the parking lot.

“Thank you. Tell Michael I said ‘hi.’”

“Same to Rick.”

“Love you, girlie.”

“You, too.”

The two shared one more look, one more cleansing moment of friendship, and turned to their cars to part ways once more.

Ellis

I don't know why I wandered into Sticky Fingers Diner earlier this evening, but apparently I wander a lot now. Ever since I started college, I feel like I'm constantly finding myself in some aimless, half-sure state. I'll be at the university student center, walking up and down corridors and commons areas, pausing by an empty lounge chair—almost about to sit down in it—then some other chair with a better view catches my attention, and I drift over to it, but then I decide I don't want to sit in this wing of the building, and I change directions and head back the way I came, until I finally find somewhere that will do—that's not ideal, but will do—fussing about like a cat trying to make its bed. I wander on campus and off, tumbling around with the encouragement of the breeze. And so maybe it was the breeze that carried me to Sticky Fingers Diner this Thursday evening.

I swung open the door and found myself at the front of a mostly empty restaurant. The door slammed shut behind me, startling me and causing the few people seated in the dining room to turn and look at me, like I was on stage for all of them. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to just sit anywhere or if I should wait for someone to appear and direct me where to sit, so I just stood there anyway, by the front door, glancing about. I looked over to the handmade poster on the wall by the door listing the restaurant's specials—Thursday is Throwback Day, and the description beneath, which I had to squint to read, said that the restaurant brings back a different “menu item of the past” every Thursday. I looked down next to me, a couple wooden chairs placed next to the door against the wall, which must be where people wait to be seated. I looked straight back to the end of the restaurant—the restaurant was actually pretty small—and I saw a waitress standing at a server station look up and start heading my way. It was pretty obvious she was back there texting, because as she rounded the corner of the server station—a cabinet island with a register and shelving near an expo window—she was tucking something deep into her pocket and then took her hand back out.

“Hello! Just one?” she asked, approaching, with a small, bored grin. She was a redhead about my height with a noticeably oval face and freckles across her nose and cheeks, and she grabbed a menu from the host stand.

“*Just one,*” I repeated with a sigh, and I thought about how the general manager at the Buffalo Wild Wings I worked at in high school used to hound us for saying “just” to customers; he always said it was an unnecessary, negative emphasis, and we were urged to say, “Is anyone else joining you today?” instead. I still said “just” to people when he wasn’t around because I didn’t like him and I didn’t like working there because of the clientele. My Buffalo Wild Wings days are long behind me, though; I quit several months ago because I was leaving to go to college this fall.

The server grabbed a roll-up from a basket on the breakfast counter behind the host stand, and she gestured for me to follow her. I trailed her, and she led me to a small booth against the wall about halfway back. Her hair was in one braid, but it wasn’t French braided—the braid started at the nape of her neck. I was tempted for her to undo it so I could French braid it. It’d look really pretty with her hair, and one of my friends in high school had taught me to French braid once, even on myself. It’s more challenging to do a French braid on yourself, because you can’t see the back of your own head, so this was quite a feat for me. It’s about the only thing I know how to do on my own hair.

“Have you been here before?” the waitress asked, floating beside me as I scooted into the short booth seat. When I sat down, she floated closer to me, like a balloon tied to my wrist.

I looked down at the menu—a laminated, colorful placemat. There were so many fonts and the design was so chaotic that it was almost overwhelming and I didn’t really know where to start with it. “No,” I said, looking back up at her moonlike face.

“Then welcome to Sticky Fingers!” she said, flourishing her hands out at her sides like she was presenting the restaurant to me. “My name is McKenzie and I’ll be taking care of you. Today is Throwback Thursday, which is when we bring back a menu item that we used to have on the menu but got rid of. So today, our special of the day is the Holy Moly, which is a grilled chicken on a brioche bun with swiss cheese, Goldfish crackers, Cajun sauce, green beans, and hummus.”

I leaned into the table and squinted up at her. “And that’s a sandwich?”

“Mmm-hmm!”

That sounded horrible; no wonder they took it off the menu. “Can I just get a water?” I asked.

“Certainly!” she said, and left me.

I turned the menu over a few times in my hands, scanning not for food but for price. Anything with a \$5.00 or higher next to it, I didn't even bother reading the menu item. The only reason I've been able to eat these past two months I've been at college is because I have a meal plan for the dining halls—otherwise, I have practically no money, only a little left over from my time at Buffalo Wild Wings. Most of it has gone towards textbooks and tuition; my parents believe this will help teach me how to be responsible, if I pay for my own education—they're also the same people who made me get a job in high school so I could learn the value of hard work and money. Even though our family is pretty well-off and I'm an only child, they're old-fashioned and they're both academics so no matter how much I try to protest, they always out-argue me.

McKenzie returned with my water and set it down, dropping a straw beside it. “Would you like to try the Holy Moly?” she asked, pulling her notepad out of the front of her apron and posing a pen above it.

“Oh no,” I said with a little laugh, still searching the menu, not sure what I wanted or what I was willing to pay for. She lingered at my side, and I felt pressured to decide right then. “I'll do the side of applesauce... and a cup of Italian wedding soup.”

She jotted something down and looked up at me expectantly, mouth slightly agape. When I said nothing for a moment, she widened her eyes and her mouth and went, “Oh, is that all?”

I handed her the menu sheepishly and said, “Yeah, I've got that college student budget.”

The waitress laughed a little and tucked her notepad back into her apron. “Oh, I know exactly what you mean.” she said, and grabbed the menu from me. Having picked it up and almost turned away, she hesitated, and added, “You know, we've been trying to hire another server, if you need a job.”

I nodded. She shrugged at her own comment, then headed to the back of the restaurant again.

I looked around now, noticing a dirty table across the restaurant from me. The couple that was there when I walked in must have left. They left behind half-drunk waters and crumpled napkins. I picked up the roll of silverware sitting on my little table in front of me and peeled off the red sticky tab that held

it rolled together. I heard a woman say loudly, “Have a good evening, McKenzie!” and my eyes instinctively followed the noise to the back of the restaurant, where an older woman with a Carhartt jacket was pushing through the door to the back of the restaurant. “You too, Roxanne,” McKenzie said without looking up from the server computer.

As I sat there, I was kind of impressed I hadn’t come across this place before. I had heard people mention Sticky Fingers around campus, but in all my wanderings, I hadn’t found it until today. It was sort of on the outskirts of downtown, tucked away behind a post office; whenever I came down Felter Street, I always took a right towards the bridge, or a left towards a string of shops, one of which is a used bookstore called Pages by Paige. They have a little café there and a reading room, so even though I never buy anything, I’ve been there a lot to spend time reading. I’ve even met Paige, but she’s an eccentric woman I’m a little weary about upsetting in any way. I don’t think she likes that I never buy anything so I try not to go there too often.

I folded the red tab in half, transforming it from a long rectangle to almost a square, and I turned it over between my fingers. I looked up, and I glanced out the window that was a couple booths down from me. Since I had a weird angle at it—one where the window looks more like a tilted slit—I couldn’t see much out of it, but I could see the gradient light blue sky and part of a building next door. When I passed by that building just before on my way here, it reminded me of the feed store from my hometown—a gray building with old, brittle glass windows and an awning over the front door. I’m from a place where there are tons of shops in old buildings, and so the rustic, vintage façade drew me in to it.

They’re redoing the one shop in my hometown, and I hope they don’t change much about the antique vibe, just do maintenance. It’s had a crooked awning with the tattered fabric hanging loosely from it, like it’s dripping, since before I was old enough to have my own money. They sell mostly bikes there, but there’s a candy section by the register, along with some fun knick knacks and novelty gifts. I went home just this past weekend for my uncle’s birthday—I hadn’t been home yet, since moving away to college—and the shop was shut down for renovations. My hometown is about a three-hour drive, and I don’t have my car on campus, so I guess it makes sense not to visit home very often. My mother picked

me up Friday afternoon after my last class and we drove to my old house, listening to James Taylor and Billy Joel on the CD player in the car—her favorites. She didn't mention that they were redoing that bike shop, though; maybe it slipped her mind or didn't seem noteworthy to her. It's not like I was really in love with the bike shop, but I liked it how it was.

McKenzie approached with a white, circular ceramic plate and set it down before me—I moved my hands away from the table so she had more room to set it down. The cup of soup was placed on a small square napkin on the left, and beside it was a little ceramic saucer of applesauce. A package of Saltine crackers garnished the plate.

“Here you are! A feast for the college student on a budget!” she said, stepping back and beaming. “Can I get you anything else right now?”

I smiled at her and shook my head. “I'm good,” I said. She nodded and left.

I pulled a spoon out of the loose silverware rollup and stirred the soup, which slightly steamed. I didn't use the crackers, but I took them for later. They found a place in my messenger bag. The soup smelled amazing, just like how my mom used to make it. I ate a spoonful and it was the perfect temperature, so I took another spoonful.

My mom's Italian wedding soup is better, but this came incredibly close. I tried to remember the last time she made it, but it was probably just another dinner during high school, and so I didn't know it would be the last time I had it for a while, and therefore didn't really notice the significance.

I nestled into the booth by bringing my knees to my chest and leaning against the wall next to me. Going home for the first time in a couple months was weird. It felt like putting on shoes I hadn't worn in a while—they were shaped to my feet, but I wasn't used to the fit anymore.

I was excited to sleep in my own bed again after sleeping on the twin-sized dorm bed for all this time. I've got a queen-sized bed in my old bedroom, and it has this grandiose canopy over it that I can pull shut when I sleep. I was also excited just to be home—my parents have a beautiful, large home, with hardwood floors all throughout and lots of bookshelves. It's always been my favorite place on Earth.

But I walked in the door, and instantly noticed little changes that weren't there a few months ago. Dad had redone the trim around all the doorways, and Mom had gotten new coil-style rugs for throughout the house. The pantry didn't have Cocoa Puffs, which I used to eat all the time for breakfast. When I walked into my room, though, it was exactly how I had left it, but it felt more like a museum, perfectly preserved since my last visit, save for a stack of folded laundry sitting on top of my dresser than my mom must have done after I left. The air didn't feel like my air. It didn't feel as easy as it had before.

I scraped the last bits of the soup from the bottom of the cup. The soup sat warmly in my stomach and the heat lingered in my mouth and throat. I saw McKenzie peek over the server station to glance at how I was doing, and then disappear again. I wondered if there are chairs back there for the servers to sit in.

I rode in my mom's car with my feet on the dashboard—for a minute. She instantly chastised me. "What do you think you're doing? We still have rules," she said. I took my feet down and leaned against the window, resting my chin in my hand. When we got closer to my hometown, it was the same scenery as before, the same fields and towns I've passed by a hundred times. I'd never been discouraged by them, but they looked so desolate now. The fields were pale yellow from the summer's crops and stretched on and on forever, with no restaurants or stores between the farm houses. Run-down trailer houses with sagging roofs and old junk trucks, immobilized in their front yard, rust creeping over the old blue paint job. There was nothing out there. I used to look at them as part of the view, part of the automatic landscape of my life, but this car ride home, I felt repulsed by the sights, I felt hyper-aware of the melancholy sheath over the town.

I licked the spoon clean and began eating the applesauce for dessert. I hadn't wanted to leave my bed Sunday morning. The sprawling mattress felt like a pool of comfort, and I floated on my back contentedly. "Come on, kiddo," my dad had finally called to me from behind my closed door around noon. "Want to watch some HGTV with me?" Dad and I used to watch HGTV together all the time; I pulled myself out of bed and told him I'd be right there, to curl up on the couch and see what Chip and Joanna Gaines were up to lately.

While I was actually sad to leave home again to come back to Bentley at the end of the weekend, I was also somewhat excited to get back to my dorm room where all my most important possessions now stayed—back to my new routine. But when my mom and dad left me in my dorm room Sunday evening by myself, pecking a kiss on my forehead and waving as they slipped out the door, I felt sort of empty. Like I didn't know what to do next. I fell into my dorm room bed and cuddled up with the body pillow I had bought for college.

A thought strikes me: Do I no longer have a home where I feel like I belong unconditionally?

“Can I get this out of your way?” I heard, and I jumped a little as I finally noticed McKenzie standing next to me with a hesitant smile, gesturing towards my plate. I had finished my applesauce.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. You were really zoned out there!”

I laughed awkwardly and rubbed my neck as she picked up the plate from in front of me. “Yeah, wow. Sorry...”

She smiled and pulled out a check presenter from her apron as she held the plate in her other. “Ah, no worries. Here's this whenever you're ready for it.” With my plate, she headed towards the swinging door that I imagine leads to the kitchen.

I unzipped a pouch on my bag and pulled out a couple bills that covered the total of my modest meal and her tip. I then caught a whiff of French fries, wafting from the kitchen. I sure love French fries and ranch, something I got from Buffalo Wild Wings; I still don't like wings, though. I sat and thought about how I used to serve at BWW, and how I struggled for a little while because I wasn't used to strangers treating me like I wasn't a human being with feelings. By the end, though, I had sort of learned how to not take their attitudes personally.

There's a painting at Sticky Fingers along the back wall, and I stared at it for a while before I left. It's a painting of a burger comprised of other food items, and I've never seen anything like it, but it vaguely reminds me of this goofy oil painting my dad has in his study—one of his friends painted it, and it's a picture of a man made up out of books. It's not necessarily a good painting, but I've stared at the muted reds, blues, greens, and yellows for years, back when I would go to my dad in his office for help

with homework, and I'd sit on his lap at his giant oak desk and he'd explain to me how to approach each problem.

Eventually I got up to leave. McKenzie had been buzzing around the restaurant as I meditated, wiping down the counters and sweeping under the tables. I felt hesitant to leave, though—I had made some sort of a home of the small booth. All my homes are temporary now. But I slowly promenaded out of the mostly empty restaurant, looking around more closely as I made my way out.

“Have a great rest of your evening!” I heard McKenzie call to me from the back of the restaurant.

I turned and saw her waving at me from the back server station. I waved back to her and said, “Thanks; you too!”

I zipped up my jacket and switched my messenger bag strap to my other shoulder. As I was leaving the restaurant, I noticed a flyer posted in the little vestibule entrance. It was printed on computer paper with a black and white clipart picture of a hamburger, and it read, “HIRING SERVERS.” Beneath that, in pen, was handwritten, “AND COOKS.” I squinted at it, lingering for a moment. I glanced back inside the restaurant, at McKenzie bent over my little booth, wiping it down. Then I stepped out into the cool, breezy air.

Jimmy

Jimmy's blue two-door Honda Cruze turned into the Sticky Fingers' parking lot and whipped into the first parking spot. His radio could be heard from outside his car—the booming and rumbling of 88.3 WKY FM's talk show hosts' voices reverberating so that the white-haired couple walking past his car from the restaurant could just about make out their discussion on plastic straws. He swung open his car door and the radio became clearer: “I don't trust cups. Who knows how dirty they are? Even if—” Jimmy cut the engine and the talk show host off.

He arched his back so he could shove his keys in his front jeans pocket and set his left foot on the parking lot ground. With a grunt, he pulled himself out of his car, which sat low to the ground. Jimmy bent over and pulled the trigger that popped the trunk and pushed the driver door closed.

The crisp morning air felt good to Jimmy. He was a warm body, with plenty of meat around his middle, and he was short, too. While a middle-aged woman in a pea coat scuttled past him hurriedly from her car to the diner entrance, he comfortably wore only a t-shirt, which was big enough not to emphasize his gut, and which hung loosely off his right shoulder, and swung where his right arm would be, had the rollers of his family's corn picker not chewed it up when he was eleven years old.

His father was irritated when it happened—a farmer his whole life, Jimmy's father had seen many men lose limbs to heavy farming machinery. He was annoyed Jimmy didn't know better than to stick his arms in the rollers; how many times had he warned him? His three oldest sons managed to reach adulthood without losing their limbs; why couldn't the runt be more like them? But Jimmy thought he could be quick enough to free the corn stalk and pull his arm out before the blades started rotating again. He had watched his father do it a couple times, but Jimmy had neither fortune nor experience on his side that day, almost thirty years ago.

Now, Jimmy grabbed his supplies from his trunk. He was a window washer. At no point had he actually set out to be a window washer—in fact, he almost came into it because he thought the idea of being a “freelance window washer” would be funny, although he wasn't actually freelance—but he had wound up in the field twenty years ago and had found he rather liked it for what it was. He had never had

“big dreams” and figured window washing suited him better than a typing job. Anyhow, he had his nights off.

He closed his trunk and began his work on Sticky Fingers Diner’s windows. This was an easy gig—the restaurant had a long window that wrapped around the corner of the front of the restaurant, and there were a couple windows along the side of it, but a mulch patch bordered the building and so people never approached the windows, and they were often without need for cleaning. The most difficult part of Sticky Fingers’ windows was that on the one side of the restaurant, overgrown rhododendron bushes almost entirely obscured the window so that he had to fight his way through them to even get to the window—and, while he had grown used to it and was fully capable of managing on his own, his missing right arm didn’t make this process easier.

Jimmy began on the side of the restaurant with the rhododendron bushes. He figured he’d start with the hard part first. The branches were scratchy and what was left of the wilting flowers was cool on his skin. In the early morning light, the faded beige of the bush, the gritty gray of the parking lot, the blue of the sky were all still very unsaturated, hazy and muted during this denouement of dawn. He ducked his head—thick, like the rest of him—and made a sweeping motion with his left arm to catch and pull back the branches, and then he reached the window, where there was a small gap between the plant and the window.

His belt had a few handy window-washing gadgets. He likened it to Batman’s utility belt—Batman, his favorite comic book super hero, a man who had no God given powers yet worked hard for every skill he possessed. Jimmy worked with a wet squeegee, a dry squeegee, and a towel. First, he took the wet squeegee and moistened the window with it; the squeegee had a spongy head that softly washed the window. Then he traded it for his dry squeegee, which gently pulled away the chemicals with its plastic edge. He glided it over the glass in a fluid motion with his wrist, snaking back and forth across the window, working his way down; a few stray droplets began to drip and he quickly caught them with another swipe of his squeegee.

Inside the restaurant, the window was right next to a booth, but it was empty. It made no difference to him anyway. When he had first started window washing, he used to get embarrassed when people inside the building looked up and saw him right there, “peering into” their business, and they would be startled, or apprehensive about him, but now he had come to be rather apathetic about it. Besides, he was practiced and he could clean a window so quickly that often people did not even realize he was there.

The last step of his process was to wipe the window down with a dry towel. This took care of the finishing touches. He hung his towel back on his belt and gave the window a final assessment before moving on. The next window was also obscured by the bushes, so he edged along the side of the brick exterior in the space between the wall and the rhododendron bushes, as though he were scaling it. It was easier to follow the gap than to fight his way out and fight his way back in. He had been washing Sticky Fingers’ windows for five years and so he knew.

The booth by this window was occupied; an older black man in a sweater sat reading a book, his hot tea steaming from his mug in front of him. He was absorbed in his reading and Jimmy finished this window without him noticing his presence. Jimmy was not one to peer through windows—this hobby had long lost its appeal, as he had seen just about every scene imaginable and had speculated every back story conceivable for the people he saw, and now he found other pathways for his mind’s entertainment—but it is challenging to wash transparent windows without at least noticing what lies on the other side. He squeegeed and wiped, squeegeed and wiped.

Jimmy wedged his way over to the third and final window that the rhododendron bushes obscured. He noticed that the woman in the pea coat was seated in this booth with a younger woman and her toddler. She looked much warmer in the restaurant, sipping her coffee and smiling at her daughter, or what Jimmy perceived to be her daughter. The little boy pointed at Jimmy and the two women turned and looked at him. The little boy began to pull one of his arms inside his t-shirt and his mother turned to him and attempted to pull the boy’s arm back through its proper shirt hole. Jimmy made quick work of this window, too.

That was it for this side of the building, so he pushed his way out of the rhododendron bushes using the same technique as he did when he entered them. He always felt a bit like he was entering or exiting Narnia, the dramatic way he had to climb through them to or from the window—*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* having been his favorite book as a child and the only one he still remembered as an adult. This time upon climbing through the bushes, he stumbled over an especially rigid branch low to the ground, but caught and steadied himself, holding one arm out for balance. He bolstered at his quick save, though, nodding and looking back at the tangled snare he had just escaped. “Damn bushes,” he muttered. “But can’t stop me.”

Next he rounded the building and began on the windows along the other side. There were no bushes in front of these windows, only mulch patches with nothing growing. That was how Sticky Fingers was, it seemed to him—somewhat negligent, because it was a local business. That was how small businesses were: a little disorganized, do-it-yourself, and things got forgotten and unattended to. He respected it though, and to credit them for their underwhelming gardening job, autumn was pressing heavily upon the city and so everything had a dull, withering quality to it.

This window looked directly onto the server line—the short, tiled strip of the restaurant where servers made beverages and where they stored baked goods and soups, with only a short half-wall division between this and the dining area. Jimmy squeegeed the window and his eyes shifted focus between the window and the other side of the window. He saw a girl walk past, but she was young. He was not as quick at this window.

A few cars pulled into the parking spots behind him, and he moved on to the next window, which showed the edge of the server line and the counter that capped it. A couple college-age kids sat on bar stools at the counter, twisting on the stools mindlessly as they leaned on the counter and talked to each other. Jimmy squeegeed the window thoughtfully and wiped it deliberately. The girl he had seen in the window before—long light brown hair thrown up in some sort of clip, strands of hair floating like octopus arms from the clip—hesitantly approached the college students and said something, to which they both nodded, and to which the girl then looked relieved. The one college-age boy at the counter caught Jimmy

out of the corner of his eye and startled a bit, flinching and making eye contact with Jimmy, briefly, then the boy's attention was redirected.

A woman approached the counter from the dining room, wearing the same red polo that the young waitress wore. The woman—middle-aged, short and thinning dark brown hair, creased face—said something directed to the young girl. Jimmy now absent-mindedly cleaned the window, paying attention to the scene inside. The older waitress shook her head and used her hands as she spoke, then made her way off from them, leaving the younger waitress looking a little shaken and rubbing her neck.

Jimmy laughed to himself. That was Roxanne—her bark was worse than her bite. She had a way of coming off a little aggressive, but really she was harmless. Jimmy returned to his work, feeling more energized.

Roxanne had been a family friend for most of Jimmy's life. She had always been a little rough around the edges, a little gruff. He supposed there was no other way a girl could be though when she had six brothers, and one of which who died when she was nine years old. She was a serious girl—or woman, now—but she enjoyed herself, too. She liked to give people shit. She liked to give Jimmy shit, because he would always take it. Roxanne had always waited for the day he would give it right back to her. That day had never come though.

The young girl had wandered back down the server line and out into the dining room, where she was busing a dirty table. Jimmy had begun on the giant window, the one that wrapped around the front corner. He was mindlessly washing them again, but now instead of thinking about his own thoughts, he was concentrated on what was happening inside. Roxanne was carrying an armful of plates to a table, the plates staggered up her left arm, and she set them one by one down on the table in front of each person. When she started to walk away from the table, she noticed Jimmy in the window and they made eye contact; Jimmy smiled briefly, but Roxanne turned and walked off to her next task. Jimmy washed the windows every Tuesday, so Roxanne was used to seeing him around. Her non-smile wasn't meant to be rude; she was merely unimpressed by seeing him. One thing about Roxanne was that she never tried to force anything about herself.

She definitely tried to force things about others, though. In school, Roxanne had always tried to get Jimmy to be more assertive. Not surprisingly, Jimmy had been picked on a lot for his missing arm. Roxanne was a few years older, and the two of them didn't necessarily hang out in school, but when she did notice him being bullied, she never intervened. She would watch and see how Jimmy reacted. He always took it. Roxanne would watch, and when the instigators finally got bored with him, she would come up to Jimmy, saying something like, "How's it going, gimp? Nice moves—curling up in a ball and all that." Of course, if he had been pushed around a little bit, she would check him out, her brow furrowing slightly as she glanced at his arm or his bloodied nose, and she'd say that he needed to learn to make it himself in this world. In rare moments of tenderness, she would add, "I don't need your gimp ass missing any more of yourself. You're like a brother to me." This stung him. He didn't want to be her brother.

Now Roxanne was saying more things to the young server, who was nodding energetically in response. Jimmy had never seen the girl before and figured her to be new, the way she gingerly poured coffee and sheepishly interacted with customers. Jimmy squeegeed and wiped, squeegeed and wiped.

The sun had crept its way up in the sky. The earth felt like it began to unthaw, the fall colors strengthening. Jimmy finished up the outside windows. Now he got to do the inside.

This was relatively uneventful, though, because three of the windows were unattainable because customers sat at them. Jimmy didn't have to wash any windows that would require bothering guests. He got to work on the interior of the big front window.

"Hey Jimbo," he heard from behind him as he stretched to squeegee.

He looked over his shoulder, although he knew it was Roxanne passing by. "Morning! How are you?" Jimmy turned back around to finish the section he was squeegeeing.

"Exactly how I am. Want something to drink, Mr. Window Washer?" she asked sarcastically. This was one of the things she gave him shit for.

“Diet Coke,” he replied, turning around and facing her, but she was already rounding the counter and walking down the server line to get his Diet Coke. A single chime from a bell sounded from somewhere in the restaurant.

Jimmy reached over the booth seat and squeegeed the other part of the big window, and was wiping it when Roxanne returned with a Styrofoam to-go cup of Diet Coke and a straw. She set it on the empty table nearby him and kept walking, heading back towards the expo window in the back. Jimmy finished up these windows and took a drink from his Diet Coke. He didn’t really like Diet Coke but he had some vague feeling it was better for him than regular Coke.

He also didn’t have to wash the windows on the server line because of a health precaution the owner had wanted to take—the owner didn’t want to inadvertently mix any of the window washing chemicals with food products. He was very paranoid about health codes, his restaurant being a small restaurant and all. They couldn’t afford to be shut down, of course.

Jimmy waited by the host stand with his Diet Coke. Roxanne knew the drill. He was waiting for the check from the restaurant—a hefty \$25 for his hour’s worth of work. Window washing was a good business to get into. The chemicals were cheap to buy, and so the profit margins were high. Jimmy thought about taking what he knew and starting up his own company, but at this point in his life he wasn’t looking to take financial risks like that, and he was cozy with his portion of that hourly pay.

The young waitress came up to the counter and handed two plastic bags filled with to go boxes to the couple still spinning on the stools and wished them a good day. The couple—a young woman and a young man—stood and turned with their bags and walked towards Jimmy, who was in their way.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, stepping to the side as they squeezed past him.

“No problem,” the guy said, and as they got by, Jimmy noticed the girl’s eyes fall to his right side, where his arm wasn’t, her gaze sweeping downward like it was streaming down a waterfall, just as he was used to. At the last minute she flashed a kind smile at Jimmy, having assessed his peculiarity, and they swept out of the restaurant.

Jimmy stood idly and took a sip of his Diet Coke, setting it down on the counter. Another day in the life of a window washer. Or was it a day in the life of a one-armed man? He had a first date that night, he remembered then. With a divorced woman who worked at a pharmacy. Jimmy had never been married, and had joined eHarmony several years ago. Every now and then he went on a date, to try to meet someone who he would be swept off his feet by, someone who would arouse something in him, something passionate and assertive like he never was, but none of the women he dated ever became more serious than a girlfriend of a few months. Probably they were all underwhelmed by him. He enjoyed the company while it lasted.

Roxanne burst through the kitchen swinging door and approached Jimmy.

“Here you are, kid,” she said, waving a check in the air. Jimmy tried to take it from her, but she flicked it out of his reach at the last second. A smile cracked on Jimmy’s face, and Roxanne let out a gruff laugh. He went to take it from her hand again, and she did same.

“Too slow!” She chuckled, and Jimmy resigned and waited for her to hand it to him.

“You got me,” he said, still grinning.

“You’ve given up already? Third time’s a charm,” she replied, one side of her mouth smiling tauntingly. She waved it again, right under his nose.

“Aren’t we too old for these games?” he asked softly, shrugging.

“You’re no fun,” Roxanne said, rolling her eyes. She held out the check, and he quickly took it from her.

Even though Roxanne had long since given up on trying to help Jimmy help himself, there were still moments like this. She used to push him in more direct ways, but he never gave her shit back to her. Not once had he ever addressed her, “Miss Waitress.” He didn’t want to play games with her, to tease her and chase her around the restaurant. Jimmy wanted to tell Roxanne that she looked beautiful, but she had slapped him once when they were still in high school and he said that to her. They had been in Roxanne’s pick-up truck, and he had said it in a moment of bliss, having looked over at her and seen her short hair blustering about, windows down and the dirt from the road kicking up behind them. He had felt happy,

and he attributed it to the way Roxanne made him feel alive. So he had said she was beautiful. Roxanne swung her left arm around and laid a blow to his right cheek. “Don’t put that shit in my head,” she had barked. “Now, will you do my calculus or not?” Jimmy wasn’t even good at math.

In the restaurant, Jimmy glanced at the check Roxanne had finally handed him. It was made out to Clear Corp, the window washing company he worked for. “Fun don’t pay the bills,” he remarked, returning from his thoughts.

“Then you’re in the wrong line of work,” Roxanne muttered, flicking a crumpled up straw wrapper off the counter beside her. “Anyway, have a good one. See ya next week.” She looked at him.

Jimmy shoved the check into his cargo pocket and picked up his drink from where he had set it on the counter. “Thanks...” For a second, he thought about saying more. Maybe even asking her something. But instead he let the words sink inside him and nodded. He wanted to linger, or to be looking forward to his date that night. Roxanne squinted at him, lowered her eyes, and then walked away.

“Later, Jimmy boy!” she called.

Jimmy turned and walked back out to the parking lot. He set his drink on top of his car and popped the trunk, and put his supplies back. Then he opened the driver door and picked up his cup, turning around and plopping himself into the seat. He set the cup in the cup holder and started the car.

Jimmy was happy. Well, as happy as he could be. He wasn’t happy that he only had one arm and he wasn’t happy that he had been cleaning windows—such circular work—for longer than the young waitress at the restaurant had probably been alive, but he was as happy as he could be, all things considered. He was happy that he would have the company of a pretty redhead that evening and he was happy that he was almost to the series finale of *Mad Men*. And he was happy he got to see Roxanne once a week, because that was when he got to deal with her shit. He wished he could always deal with her shit.

Jimmy turned on the radio. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove away from Sticky Fingers Diner.