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Dinner Rush

By

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The Manager in charge told Tommy that he could go out for a cigarette as soon as DeMari was in the grill area and the screen had been cleared of all pending orders.

During the last part of the dinner rush Tommy would cook while helping DeMari make sandwiches.

Ten minutes late, DeMari came in and put on his black apron. Tommy said little, wanting desperately to get the job finished so he could go smoke. The monitor above the sandwich assembly table contained large orders in each of its eight monochrome sections and had two pending orders off screen. He knew that meant waiting for his smoke, but it was only fair that DeMari didn't begin the shift overwhelmed.

Besides the smoke, he looked forward to finishing his shift and having weekend custody of Brandon.

His ex-girlfriend had left him and taken Brandon with her over a year ago. Since he couldn't afford to live in their old apartment by himself, he moved in with two friends from high school—the same crowd she used to hang out with before she got *too* good for any of them. They fought over visitation of their son, and then finally reached an arrangement. She showed him some sympathy because he was the father, but mostly prepared Brandon for a life without him. When he went over to her house to pick up his

son he would also have to see her new boyfriend, Brett. Tommy remembered the last time he went to pick up Brandon and heard Brett brag about taking him to his first baseball game.

“He had fun last night,” Brett told him, his arms crossed and his muscles flexed. “We had the best seats in the stadium—even bought him a little mitt to catch foul balls.”

“I’m saving up to take him to his first football game,” Tommy had told him. He then mumbled walking away, “Lot better than baseball.”

In the grill, it had gotten so busy that the manager on this shift, Brian Martinez, left his cashier spot to help out. The manager-in-training stayed up front and took orders while the pregnant seventeen year-old manned Drive Thru. The grill was every manager’s favorite spot in the store, a safe haven from any possible confrontations.

“Where the hell are they all coming from?” he said, shaking his head.

“Where the hell’s the extra person on this shift? I guess they needed them all during lunch,” Tommy said.

“Well, I keep telling her we need more people,” Martinez told them. “But you know how it is. The store manager doesn’t want to look bad during lunch rush.”

Martinez was one of the few from management Tommy both liked and respected. He continually worked hard and also had the patience to work with Drew, the cashier in back-drive-thru who for the past month still made the same mistakes on similar orders. Martinez would also tell Tommy crazy stories about growing up in Mexico and also teach him Spanish swear words.

“Jódame,” Tommy said when another order popped up.

“You learn well, my friend,” Martinez said, staring at the screen.

“Hey Ed, I need your help,” Drew yelled from the back cashier spot.

“Christ, what now?” Martinez said with a sigh.

“Maybe he forgot how to push the buttons,” DeMari said.

Tommy nodded. “We gotta stop hiring people from Special Ed.”

The small, grey rectangular boom box in the grill area played the local pop station. Tommy couldn’t understand why Martinez had it on. It was as if he were trying to prove he was American. The only people he knew that listened to this were the kids in high school who had the preppy names, went on far-away ski trips in the winter time, and dressed in khakis and cashmere. The ones that mocked him and his friends yet possessed the power and money to dictate popularity.

DeMari would probably switch the boom box to the soul station when the rush died down. Tommy didn’t really care for that either, but it annoyed him less. Although it wasn’t death metal or anything like that, the songs were at least listenable. Later Martinez would change it back to the pop station, and so would begin the all-night battle of radio stations.

“You know the music has to be for everyone here, not just you,” Martinez once told DeMari.

“Oh, come on. You just don’t like black people music. Next thing you’ll be putting on is some Chicano shit.”

“If you keep it up maybe I will. You’ll be fluent.”

“I know all the important words already. Taco, burrito, guacamole, etcetera...”

“You got some mouth on you. You think you know everything.”

“Damn right. You should see how I’d run this place.”

“Thank God that day will never come,” Martinez told him.

When set to the pop station, in between the awful new song from some over-sexed, high-voiced adolescent and the latest hip-hop gibberish (with some artists now using Auto-Tune, they sounded even more robotic), the celebrity news break focused on unsubstantiated gossip. This paled in comparison to the rumors that flew around this place on a daily basis, some outrageous, some believable; some so outrageous they had to be believed. Usually someone hooked up with someone else and then broke up a week or so later, for example: the girl in drive thru who was now 6 months along. Tommy didn't bother with either hooking up or partaking in rumors. He mostly kept to himself and looked forward to quitting time.

He did enjoy working with Demari, who got along with everybody and handled the crap they threw at him with nonchalance. He could be good company enough to distract Tommy from worrying about his problems.

“I heard your woman's crabs get lost in that hedge maze of a bush she got,” DeMari told him after finishing a big order.

“You're crazy, man,” Tommy said laughing.

“That I am, bro. By the way, can I bum a cig off of you when it's my turn?”

“You always pull that shit. You make more money than I do.”

“I forgot to stop at the store. Got goin' late...almost missed the bus. And you know I can't deprive you people of my presence. This'd be a sad place without me.”

“Whatever. Just remind me when it's time.”

“Go ahead. I got the rest of this shit.”

“Thanks,” Tommy told him, tossing off his apron. “I'll be back Monday.”

“Yeah right.”

He went outside to the dumpster area of the parking lot (the only place on the store’s grounds where he was allowed to smoke). The tobacco did block out the faint odor of expired hamburger meat and congealed waste coming from behind the plywood doors of the garbage corral.

Martinez told him that he would be in drive-thru when he came back. In between drags he imagined potential assholes bitching and moaning about their orders being screwed-up. Although only a scant percentage of the interactions he had there, they would be the ones he’d remember enough to dread his next time there. He doubted the previous girl stocked up before she left, she talked too much and half-assed her way through her job, and the Manager-in-training, a petite college girl who ate here everyday and remained as svelte as ever, would be too busy chatting with Martinez to supervise her. Those two carried on enough that Tommy wondered if Martinez was hittin’ that (for all he knew Martinez was gay, which he thought would explain his taste in music).

Like most everyone who worked here, he wished he could remain in grill. Although Martinez was on the front register and would be nearby to help, he would most likely go back in grill to complete orders when things got really busy. For most of the night, Tommy would be by himself and would have to do the work of two people in order to feed either a bunch of stoners with the munchies or four hundred-pounders buying three value meals for only themselves. As the night got busier and the service slowed down, some customers would yell at him and even look at him with enraged, glossed-over eyes that saw him as a worthless punk with no future—a look he hated. He now tried to relax with every puff that could mellow him out and make him forget.

Having not refilled or taken his anti-depressant medication in the past three days, he knew his anxiety would be elevated. After losing his other part-time job he had to wait till payday on Monday to have enough money for his refill. He could ask his parents, but that money came with a morality sermon and a heavy guilt trip about his partying. He had a simple choice: buy the pills or spend money on good times and stuff for Brandon. They never believed him when he told them most of his money went to Brandon. How else could he defeat Brett in the war for his son?

He now thought about taking Brandon to the new Disney movie this weekend if his ex hadn't already taken him (she would do that too just to spite him). He wanted to take him somewhere, but he hoped to stay around the apartment with Corrine and her son. The kids could go off and play while the adults hung out. He loved to spend hours with her talking about whatever came to mind.

On his return the first hour in Drive-Thru went well. He had a small station off to the side of the store. Cold, lifeless corporate-imposed steel instruments of efficiency that were anything but efficient surrounded him. He could, with a sharp mind and a swift hand, make order of this utter chaos of computer screens and high-pitched beeping. The irritating noises then fell into a rhythm and his actions became a dance where he gracefully performed fast, instinctive responses.

So far Drive Thru, he had to admit, had gone well. Some of the cars were full of young women: one had three beautiful blond college girls and the other, two slutty, half-drunk ones whose breasts bounced out of their loose clothing. Seeing more girls like that might be the only thing that would get him through this night. So instead of focusing on

what could go wrong, he thought about getting a number. If not, he could still keep his mind occupied until closing time.

But he knew this continuing order couldn't last. Drew kept making mistakes that Tommy would be forced to tell Martinez about or would try to correct them himself. Either way the drive-thru screen became a backlog of orders. He slowed down and the noises surrounding him grew more frequent. The harder he worked the busier it got. Then the supplies ran out leaving him scrambling around to re-supply his area and in turn, causing an even greater backlog of orders.

Martinez went to the back cash area from his relief work in grill to take care of the latest mistake Drew had made. To Tommy, dealing with stupid people was a part of the job and this restaurant attracted morons for both employees and customers. But he had to relax. The more frustrated he got, the more he'd shake off the rage that would make his body shiver as if his immune system was fighting off an evil virus trying to gain complete control.

The longer their wait the angrier the customers got. They were more pissed-off at him than with Drew. They wanted their food now with an impatience he didn't understand. At one point, two teenagers cussed him out over the slow service. Their faces were shaded in the car's dark interior and Tommy could only see their huge silver crosses glimmering from the parking lot lights. As they pulled away he looked after them in confused frustration.

Fortunately, after five more minutes, drive-thru finally emptied and he relaxed. He would be ok without his pills. With only an hour left, Tommy now restocked. In back drive-thru Drew chatted away on a cell phone with a sink still piled up with dishes

and other equipment that needed washing before the closing crew could leave. Martinez would go back and tell Drew to get those dishes done, but he was on the office phone most likely appeasing an angry customer.

While stocking Tommy saw a car drive up to the speaker on the store's black and white security monitor above his drive-thru station. Drew still talked on the phone. He hoped that Drew told them over his headset that he'd be with them in a second. But the next time he looked over to the drive-thru window, he saw a sour middle-aged couple. "Didn't you hear us at the speaker? We were waiting five minutes for an answer." He wanted to explain to them that he was not the back cashier. But why explain? Customers neither understood nor cared about how things worked in here. Besides, the people in the car looked at him as if he was an incompetent ass and no matter what he did their rotten night would be his fault.

He took their order from the front and told the couple again how sorry he was for the inconvenience—all the time they looked at him skeptically. After they drove away, he marched over to Drew's station to see why he missed that order. But seeing that he still talked on his phone, Tommy snapped. He grabbed him and threw him against the wall next to the sink of dirty dishes.

"Asshole, do your fuckin' job."

"Get your hands off me!"

"Shut up, you little bitch"

"Get your fucking hands off me!" He screamed, trying to fight back.

At the sound of his startling scream, Tommy released his hold on Drew, shocked at what he had done. Drew was against the wall when DeMari jumped in between both of them.

“Come on, cut this shit out!”

“Hey, what’s going on back there?” Martinez said with the phone to his side.

Looking around in flustered resignation, Tommy said, “You know what? I don’t need this shit.” He threw down his hat and headed for the door.

He had made it as far as the store’s entrance, when he turned back to see his manager standing at the front counter between Drew and DeMari. To Tommy, the three of them looked trapped in a world of burning meat, beeping fryers, and unsatisfied costumers. In his disgust, Tommy turned back around and walked out.

He peeled out of the parking lot looking straight ahead the entire time. The confused emotions trying to surface only bottlenecked to the point that he could not express any emotion at all, just the impetus to keep on driving until he reached the apartment.

When he arrived he threw his keys down, stomped through the living room, pulled out his pack of cigarettes, and stepped out to the balcony. He did not say a word to Corrine, who sat on the couch watching some low-budget horror movie. He moved one of the patio chairs from the glass table and sat in it. He scanned over the distance that a three-story elevation provided him. On his third drag he heard the door slide open, and Corrine brought her ashtray and pack out to join him.

“So, what’s up?”

He pushed the chair back to the table. “I lost it.”

They then talked a while--he as confessor and she as consoler. The late-summer air had that cooled and hanged crispness to it and the smoke each one blew floated visibly above them. Realizing he still had his work shirt on, he removed it, leaving only an under shirt tank top. It matched what Corrine wore. She liked her arms bare so as to show off her tattoos: a floral pattern of orange, blue, and yellow that covered her entire arm from her shoulder blade to elbow, and that complimented her hair dyed bright orange.

He could see that, even in her soothing reassurance, the worry over losing the rent money her and her boyfriend received from him each month. He understood; wasn't hard for him to imagine the comfortable cushion his cash provided. Mostly he saw her genuine concern, which flamed on his slight crush, even though she lived with his best friend from high school.

"I had some good times with those guys too. Wasn't the worst job I ever had. I could go back easily. You should see the fuck-ups they rehire—total losers. Management just wants someone with working legs, and hell, I actually have working brain cells."

"Yeah, I know the rules are bullshit and you should rebel whenever you can, but you got worries now. Not too many options either: go back, find another job, or hope your lotto numbers come up."

"Hey. I said I have working brain cells."

She smirked as she took another drag.

A moment later the sliding glass door to the apartment opened partway.

"I had a nightmare," a half-awake tiny voice whimpered.

"Ok, baby. Go sit on the couch and I'll be in to take you to bed."

Tommy glanced at the little boy and then looked down while turning his chair slightly back towards the balcony ledge.

“I guess I—got to get him to bed,” she told him, eyes pointed downward.

“No problem. I’d like to stay out here for a little while. Thanks” He shot her an index finger and bared his teeth in an exaggerated smile.

A minute later she came back outside and put a half-empty bottle of Jack on the table.

“Drink responsibly,” she said as she went back in.

Sitting alone outdoors, he thought back to the quiet nights after the store had been closed-down and he had stood outside with Martinez while DeMari waited for his girlfriend to come pick him up (DeMari joked they must really love him to be out here and protect him like this). As they stood at the front of the store waiting for a car to pull into the driveway, the conversation turned to the history of the restaurant. Martinez told them about the original owners, their inventions, and how they had gotten the idea from Henry Ford’s assembly line.

“They were really brilliant, but they couldn’t figure out how to market their ideas and expand their business. A bunch of powerful executives could, and they stole the store right out from under them,” Martinez looked up at the large corporate logo that stood thirty feet in the air. “Poor bastards died penniless.”

“Don’t surprise me,” DeMari said, between drags of his cigarette.

“But hey, that’s the way it is. You gotta make sure you can survive. You can’t be weak,” Martinez said.

“I guess it can’t be any other way, either,” Tommy mumbled to himself.

As he sat on the creaking patio furniture he thought about the wealthy and the rules they created for others. They had more control over his life than he had. The dreams he had when he was young were now both distant and surreal. All he could hope for was that his son could do better than he did. Yet he feared that same power would also rule over everything Brandon would ever do.

Except for a distant window light from an apartment having a party and the glow at the end of his cigarette, it was almost completely dark. He now thought about his son. Brandon was the only saving grace he had. Those little eyes full of oblivious love that didn't judge him, only seeing a man capable of any greatness his young mind could imagine. He decided to go back tomorrow more supplicant than before, taking the blame for the previous night and hoping his act of contrition was enough to get his old job back. Tommy remembered the look on his manager's as he left the store for good—the look of someone trapped in a situation that no one wanted to be in; a store full of empty lives working jobs no one else wanted, barely scraping by, and all the while taking the mockery and frustrations of everyone else in society.

He then realized what angered and depressed him most: he cared about the job, took pride in being able to work hard and be recognized. And that made him want the pills all the more because he no longer wanted to care about such things. Let those feelings die because they did little for him. Do things mindlessly: no longer care about the job; become a part of those lifeless, cold corporate instruments that would surround him. He doubted the medication could go as far as that, but he hoped it did and even hoped the medication would extinguish the amorous desires he felt towards Corrine,

especially when he sat up late with her on the balcony as her boyfriend worked the late shift so he could provide for her and their son.

He flicked his cigarette into an empty parking space below and then watched its faint, orange glow flicker and extinguish. “Fuck it,” he said, mostly in a whisper above an exhale. Tonight he’d get drunk enough to fall asleep in that patio chair, which became more comfortable with each sip. He did harbor a small hope that Corrine would come back outside, take pity on him, and walk him back into the house—he dragging his feet in a half-waken state with his arm around her shoulders.