

Rats it, I Quit!

Timmy Wallace mopped up the vomit around the very barstool his father had died. Only when he tasted blood did Timmy realize he was biting his lip. It had been a year since his dad's heart attack, but the pain was still fresh. He could hear Mrs. Tibbets hollering for him to hurry up. "The toilet's plugged in the women's john. I've got paying customers waiting!"

Looking around, he noticed there weren't any women around and only a handful of men. This was a working man's bar. The only one who could have plugged the women's toilet was Mrs. Tibbets herself. He shuddered.

He tuned her out and paused for a moment to give the seat of the stool a reverent stroke. Yellow foam oozed out of a three-inch gash in the cracked vinyl like a persistent memory. He tried to stuff it back in, pinching the black material back together hoping to seal the wound. When he let go, the unrelenting cushion popped back out. His dad's screwdriver had cut into the seat years ago. He always forgot to take off his tool belt before he ordered his first beer. This was *his chair, his spot* in this dive of a tavern. To Timmy, it was hallowed ground.

"Timmy!" He hated the sound of that shriek. He gave the stool one last pat and headed into the women's restroom, bracing himself for the mess he would find.

After the bathroom debacle, he was on his hands and knees polishing the brass foot rail that ran along the main bar. Big John picked up his mammoth boots and said, "I don't know why you work for that old hag. She treats you like crap."

Timmy shrugged. “Don’t have much choice,” he muttered. He couldn’t tell Big John that he was lucky to have a job at all or that his mother had been working three jobs since his dad passed and it still wasn’t enough to get by. He was only fifteen-years-old and after school jobs were scarce. He had to take what he could get. Crawling past Big John’s intimidating Timberland’s he continued polishing the brass rail. Nearing the end, he slowed his progress. He knew what was coming next.

It wasn’t the mopping, the toilets, the scrubbing or polishing he hated the most. It wasn’t even the shrill sound of Mrs. Tibbets’ voice. The worst part of the job was his last duty of the day: taking out the garbage.

In slow motion, he gathered the bag behind the bar and the two in the kitchen and Mrs. Tibbets grumbled, “Lazy kid. Won’t grow up to be nuttin’.”

Timmy sucked in his breath and juggled the heavy bags to open the back door that led to the dumpster. He dodged out, slamming the door behind him, and took a quick glance around. Nothing. “Tawny,” he said in a loud whisper. “Com’on baby, it’s just me.”

Tawny was a just a kitten when he found her, an abandoned ball of tan fluff. Timmy had just lost his father and took pity on the poor thing. When he picked her up and held her to his cheek, the soft fur on his cheek gave him comfort. When the kitten lapped up his stray tears, Timmy fell in love. “It’s okay, little thing, I have lost a parent too. I know how you feel.”

After that, Timmy sat out stolen cans of tuna fish from Mrs. Tibbets kitchen and little bowls of milk. She didn’t catch on until a month later, and when she did, she lost it. He was browbeaten for twenty minutes straight and a few days later found his check had

been garnished. It didn't take a mathematician to realize she had overcharged him for the tuna and milk by over three times their worth.

Now, he eyed the dumpster warily, listening for any movement. So far, so good. He lunged toward the heavy lid and gave it a strong upward push. In one fluid motion, he threw the bags of trash inside and reached again for the lid. The weight of the cover made him lose his momentum. White balls bounced out of the dumpster like popcorn. The rats scurried past Timmy's legs, brushing his pant leg as they went by. Timmy's stomach lurched as he slammed the lid back on.

A particularly brave rodent hesitated at the door to grab a bit of bread crust he hoped Tawny would find. "Git," Timmy said, his voice quavering. He stomped his foot, but the rat was unaffected. "Go on," Timmy insisted, fighting back threatening tears. He let out a sigh as the rat meandered off to the alley, its cheeks bulging. Timmy ran through the door, slamming it shut behind him. His back hugged the inside of the door, willing his heart to beat a normal rhythm.

"Make sure that back door is shut tight," yelled Mrs. Tibbets. "Ya gotta slam it!"

Pure hatred shot through Timmy's blood. He could feel his temples throbbing. He knew he had to slam the door. She told him that every day. He wasn't stupid. He wouldn't dare let one of those pink-eyed monsters inside. Mrs. Tibbets' raucous laughter shattered his ego when she saw him panting by the door. "You are such a wus," she said, shaking her head. "Never amount to anything."

Trying to regain his dignity he bolted by her, punched his time card and strode through the main bar without saying goodnight to the regulars. Once outside the front entrance, he wiped his forehead and realized he was sweating.

When he entered the lonely apartment, he pulled out a pizza box from the refrigerator and heated up three slices in the microwave. The remaining two were for his mother. She would be hungry when she got home after working the late shift at the neighborhood diner.

He made sure the door was locked before going to bed. Under the sheets, he fell into a restless sleep. He dreamt of huge ivory monsters with blazing red eyeballs chasing him through a complex maze. Their long tails coiled and unfurled like menacing whips. Mrs. Tibbets, looking even more grotesque than usual, sat on a mammoth black throne far above them. Her eyes glowed with delight as she screeched, "Get him! Get him!" Then she would yell to Timmy, "Slam the door, you idiot! Slam the door!"

Timmy raced through the maze but couldn't find a door. The rats were so close behind him he could smell their rancid breath. When Timmy awoke, he was trembling and his sheets were damp.

The next day, Timmy left school and found his steps dragging the closer he came to the bar. He didn't want to deal with those rats so soon after his nightmare. "You're five minutes late." Mrs. Tibbets pointed up to the clock when he shuffled through the front door.

He didn't have the strength to respond, so he looked past her and nodded toward Big John. "Afternoon, Tim," Big John said. Timmy did a stutter-step. No one had ever called him Tim before, always Timmy. Tim was his dad's name. His cheeks flushed, but his chest swelled with pride.

Mrs. Tibbets brought him back to reality. "Hurry up and punch in, I need all the mirrors washed today."

Windex and paper towels in hand, Timmy stared at himself in each mirror, past the Budweiser, Coors Light, and Miller logos. I am Tim, he told himself. His upper lip looked darker than usual. He felt it to determine whether it was a budding moustache or a shadow. His index finger ran across two inches of downy hair. A moustache!

When Mrs. Tibbets retreated into the kitchen to check on her mushroom soup, Big John called Timmy over. “What are you going to do next week when school gets out? Are you going to get more hours here?”

“I don’t know. Mrs. Tibbets and I haven’t discussed it.”

“Why don’t you work for me this summer? You can be my apprentice. I’ll teach you to be a carpenter just like your dad. A full time job, Tim. Think about it.” He handed Timmy a business card.

Timmy’s eyes grew wide. Big John had been one of his father’s closest friends. Timmy had known him since he was a boy. “I don’t have a car,” Timmy stammered, not believing that he could ever get so lucky as to have a real job.

“You live three blocks from me. I will pick you up every morning, Monday through Friday. The pay starts at ten dollars an hour. We’ll see how you do the first month and it might get higher.”

Timmy swallowed hard. Ten dollars an hour! Mrs. Tibbets paid him under the table for less than minimum wage. “Consider yourself lucky,” she always said.

“Think about it and call me this weekend. This ain’t no place for a young man to be. That woman will knock the spirit out of you if you work for her any longer.”

“I know,” Timmy murmured.

Just then, Mrs. Tibbets came out of the kitchen and her jaw dropped then clamped shut when she saw Timmy talking to Big John. Her lips formed a thin curvy line. The few customers at the bar grew silent, waiting for the show. “I don’t pay you to socialize,” she said, her mouth barely moving. “I don’t know why I even let you work here. I must be some kinda fool!”

“Sorry,” Timmy mumbled and went back to cleaning the mirrors. He could see Mrs. Tibbets in the reflection watching his every move. Her face twisted into an ugly snarl, her eyes squinty and cold.

Big John left a tip and told the other customers good night. He walked by Timmy. Without stopping or looking at him, he whispered. “Call me.”

Timmy’s couldn’t wrap his mind around this opportunity. His luck had been so bad the last year, he couldn’t trust anything good happening. It was too overwhelming.

“Bathrooms,” Mrs. Tibbets said, after the mirrors were sparkling. Her voice was colder than the cracked tile he would be cleaning. He scrubbed the toilets and picked cigarette butts out of the urinals, recalling how Mrs. Tibbets once told him she wanted them “spit shined”. She laughed at her tasteless joke like a deranged crone.

Mrs. Tibbets barged into the restroom, interrupting his thoughts. “After you’re done here, I need the lot around the dumpster picked up. There is a ton of trash on the ground out there. It is disgusting.” Timmy cringed. He would be with the rats for a good twenty minutes, that’s if he hurried. No customers ever parked back there, and it was a mess. He reached in his back pocket to make sure Big John’s card was still there.

An idea began to form in his mind as he scrubbed the graffiti off the walls, one so outrageous it made him giddy. He could picture his dad laughing, encouraging him. His dad was so much fun before his heart gave out.

Timmy put the cleaning supplies back in the kitchen, his courage waffling. “From now on, the back lot will be one of your daily duties,” Mrs. Tibbets said. “If it is done on a regular basis it will never become the disgrace it is now. I want you to put this rat poison out as well. Put it out in at least a half dozen places.”

“What about Tawny?”

“Puhleese, I have a business to run, not an animal shelter. If Tawny dies, so be it. It has a miserable life anyway.”

“She,” Timmy said.

“What?” She eyed him as if she had never seen him before.

“She,” Timmy said louder. “Tawny is a SHE.”

“Whatever,” Mrs. Tibbets said, rolling her eyes. “If you worried about your job half as much as you cared about that mangy cat, you’d be a lot better off.”

Mrs. Tibbets stalked into the main bar and Timmy secretly punched out. He emptied the three garbage cans and carried the bags to the back lot. “Don’t forget to . . .”

“I know!” His voice was louder than he intended. He shut the door behind him to drown out Mrs. Tibbets voice. Dozens of ravenous rats milled around the dumpster and walkway. He ripped open the bags and scattered the smelly mess all around the dumpster. The final bag he used to back a trail of food scraps from the dumpster to the back door. Stepping back inside for a moment, he yelled in a loud, strong voice, “Good

bye, Mrs. Tibbets. I quit.” He strode back out the door with quick, smooth steps. He held his head high. This time, he did not slam the door behind him.

He left it wide open.