

WHEN THE SALMON GETS CAUGHT

It consisted of two children sitting at the kitchen eating fish for dinner. Two child-sized fishing poles and one adult-sized fishing pole could be seen leaning in the corner. The title on the bottom of the frame read "When The Salmon Gets Caught", and it made Tony feel nostalgic for some reason. Although he had never gone fishing. To him, the painting that hung before him was the only pleasant thing in the cafeteria, or anywhere.

The food on his tray was from Tuesday. People chewed loudly, some on their phones. The soda machine groaned in a corner and Tony's chair squeaked whenever he moved as if it was in pain.

"You are better than this place," he silently told the painting. *"The fact that you've been here, near the dining room bathrooms, pure disgrace."*

Tony wasn't in a good location himself. The Uppers had "relocated" his desk near Joel's. The sap who never pulled enough weight because he was too busy arguing with people on the internet and commenting on girls' posts who had to be at least ten years prior. The Uppers had to make room for Mr. Stellon's (or as Tony called him, Stalkem) new office girl of the month. She had magically been given a promotion by Stalkem. Tony wouldn't have judged too harshly, but the girl, Kate or Katie or something, had only been with the company for four months and didn't have anything to show for it. Maybe in Stalkem's office, but that was something else to talk about.

The one benefit of seeing everyone's work reports was that Tony knew who was good and who was good at kissing ass.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He still had nine more minutes before his lunch break was over, and he wanted to use every minute. It was either this squeaky chair or his chair at his desk that was borderline broken. Even if there were other spots in the cafeteria dining room, this one was the closest to *The Salmon* and had the best view of it.

"It's just some cheap work, done by a local high schooler."

The harsh words of his colleague Jan popped into his mind. She had been gossiping about it with Laura last week after Laura had called it ugly.

Jennifer S., from Brighton High School, grade 10, as stated on the plaque.

"That school always donates a few to the businesses in the area. Stellon even has one in his office. This one's okay, I guess... The kids' faces look funny. I feel like there's plenty of better ones."

"Like that one by the new girl's desk!"

"Oh yeah! That's a good one. This one's too sloppy."

Their laughs had felt cruel, and Tony had taken the comments personally. It had made him lose his appetite that day.

Luckily, Tony wasn't focused on them today, but rather on *The Salmon* itself. He had theorized so many ways he could take the painting home with him. But security cameras were around too much, almost outnumbering the exits, and Tony would never be able to stash it somewhere. It was too big. He liked to imagine taking a shrink ray and slowly shrink it day by day until nobody realized it had escaped from the ugly orange wall it hung from.

It wouldn't be surprising if no one had reported it stolen since no one did anything around here. Stalkem didn't take anything seriously until it affected him.

Tony laughed to himself. *What would Stalkem do with the painting anyway?*

Probably give it to one of the many women he had somehow seduced, or even to The Uppers, claiming he had painted it! Just like he did with everything else, not lifting a finger except to slap his name on whatever project The Uppers wanted. He would even sign a coworker's birthday card just so he could take the gift card everyone had chipped in for. Probably.

And the way he left his pistachios everywhere. Everywhere! There was even some found in the east bathroom.

Tony sighed and closed his eyes. A headache was starting to form.

So many employees deserved recognition. The only time they had gotten it was when Stalkem was getting red in the face while yelling at them. He would follow them in the bathroom. Even women. Even to the east bathroom.

Twelve thirty-two. It was time to head back.

"I'll see you tomorrow." He nodded at *The Salmon* as he packed up his things and got up.

The Salmon would go right next to that one lamp his mother had given him, and the window that was near the door. That's where it would go. The soft yellow wall would make it look exceptionally nice. Tony had thought about it so many times.

Focusing on the painting was the only thing he could do right now. Last night when he was reading his book about cuisine culture in Hawaii, he had been interrupted by a phone call from work. It was Mike, telling him he would need to come in earlier in the morning than expected. So Tony did, arriving at the time he was told. And surprise, surprise, he was the only one in the office. Not even Mike was there, who was supposed to give Tony the papers to work on, the whole reason he came in early.

When he went up to Mike, Mike just shrugged and said, “Stellon just told me to tell you. I didn’t you’d actually come in. You hate it here.”

Lazy ass. Both of them. Stalkem can’t do anything himself!

But the day went on as usual, droll and dumb. Tony did the paperwork that Mike was supposed to give him, and everything else in a day’s work. Never-ending tasks, papers, projectschattingphonecallswhatever. Fucking whatever.

It was one thirty-eight now, long past Tony’s lunchtime. He grabbed his wallet and id badge and started for the door.

“Hey, where ya goin’ Tony? Off to your spot in the cafeteria?” He heard Joel’s voice, probably bored from doing nothing all day, but Tony ignored him. He had better things to do.

After he had finished eating, his headache still hadn’t gone away. He sighed tiredly and reached over for his plastic water bottle. It fell over just as if it was dead, just as it had done when he grabbed it from the cooler.

Tony used to stock that cooler years ago when he had worked at the cafeteria he was sitting in. Then he went to school and slowly made his way up the company to where he was now, which was barely anything. Seven years. It felt longer. He felt so old, so drained.

The Salmon had been there before his time.

What would Tony do without this stupid job? He would just end up at another one for years, doing the same thing.

His doctor told him to find a different job, that these headaches were from stress.

“And do what?” Tony had scoffed.

The doctor hadn’t given him an acceptable answer.

The Salmon stared back at him. Maybe he could be a painter, or an art collector.

He let out another sigh he hadn’t realized he was holding.

Tony used to really like his job. The first few years after graduation, he didn’t mind staying late or coming in early. Nor mind how chatty everyone was. But in those seven years, it felt like everything was against him. He felt... robbed.

The person he blamed most was Stalkem. The man was a charmer to you until he wasn’t. Then it was a screamfest. He was lazy, manipulative, sexist, narcissistic, and a lady’s man for girls who didn’t know any better. Tony hated every fiber of the man.

He once told his mother on the phone “I’d rather visit hell than go to work, because at least *he* won’t be there!”

His mother had scoffed and told him everyone's boss was like that.

Tony blinked and found that tears were forming, just a bit. He hadn't realized how angry he was.

It was three sixteen now. Two minutes before he had to go back. But he couldn't. Not with this awful headache.

The painting caught his eye again.

"When The Salmon Gets Caught." He said to himself quietly.

He gathered his things, but went to the bathrooms instead. He sat down in a stall and locked the door. He intended to sit and think for a very, very long time.

"Where is he? Did he come through here?"

Stalkem's voice echoing outside the bathroom woke Tony up. He had fallen asleep at some point in the stall. Luckily his pants were still on.

Tony groaned and carefully dipped his empty water bottle between his legs and into the toilet water, being careful not to wet his fingers. This wasn't the first time he had to do this trick.

Sure enough, the bathroom door swung open and the bastard's knock off designer shoes appeared beneath Tony's stall.

"Tony? Tony, you in here?" Stalkem's voice gargled.

Tony tipped the water bottle so that the water trickled back into the bowl. He wondered what kind of sex noises Stalkem made with that wretched voice.

"Just finishing up, Mr. Stellon. What did you need?"

"What I *neeeeed* is for you to get your ass on those client call reports! I *neeeeed* them by tomorrow at one!"

"Then you might want to talk to the person who does that, Mr. Stellon." Tony clenched his jaw. "I don't do those kinds of reports. You're thinking of the guy I used to be next to. Mr. Johnny Tallsmond. He does those."

"Johnny's busy with other things. He doesn't have time. So you have to instead."

Tony's anger rose and he stood up, clenching his bottle.

"No one told me!" He barked. "You expect me to get them done by then?"

Stalkem ignored him.

“And you’ll need to help Miss Katlyn’s project. She’s gotten a bit far behind. It’ll be due to my office next week Friday. This folder will catch you up.”

Stalkem tossed a file on to the tile floor so that it slid towards Tony’s feet. Thank God this wasn’t the east bathroom.

Some of the contents had spilled out. There was practically nothing in it, and Tony knew it was a big project, assigned at least a month ago.

“That’s it!” He growled. He kicked the papers back. “To hell with this, and to hell with you! All of you!”

In a blind fury, Tony swung the stall door open and shoved Stalkem out of the way, practically knocking him down. He poured the rest of the toilet water on the man, then threw the bottle onto the floor and stomped on it.

“Wha-what is this?” Stalkem’s mouth was agape as he desperately wiped off the water. His breath smelled of pistachios.

“It’s holy water! So you burn in hell like the devil you are!”

Tony stormed out of the bathroom. Nothing mattered anymore at this point. He had no thoughts, no feelings, other than rage.

He turned his head towards *The Salmon* and went towards it.

The thick frame was cold and heavy in his hands as he lifted it off the wall. It was heavier than expected. There were voices and shuffling behind him, but Tony didn’t listen. The painting was in his hands at last.

“Stop! You’re taking company property!” A deep voice was suddenly right behind him.

Tony landed on his knee first, then one elbow and his jaw. He could taste the blood from biting his tongue when he fell. His hands were suddenly empty. The painting? Where was the painting?

Tony had dropped the painting. He saw that it was on the ground right in front of him. The glass in the frame had shattered. One of the shards had torn a child’s face, so that the eye was no longer looking at the fish on the plate but rather at him.

“No! No!” Tony cried. He felt cold metal on his wrists, and the two security guards helped him up.

“C’mon man, it’s just a painting. You’re lucky no glass got on you.” One of them said.

“No! Goddamn it no! I just wanted that one thing! That goddamn thing! It’s art! And I want it! I want it!”