

The Wayside Inn

“Kate says you were giving her the stink-eye in the gym.”

Evie considered this for a second. Yes, she probably had. Kate wore the same brightly colored running clothes an alcoholic suburban mom might wear, and Evie took a suspicious extra second to examine Kate’s pumping legs and flexed arms for whatever it was that made her likable. She didn’t find it, so she took another second. And another, until the tanorexic guidette hogging the lie-down UV bed knocked into Evie on her way out and Evie realized if Kate had been checking Evie out, she’d probably have a hard time figuring out what made Evie likable too.

“The only person I glare at is you.” Evie glared at Jonathan as he held the glass he was polishing under a bar light. “Kate is paranoid.”

Evie picked up a couple menus and went to greet the family at the door, who’d waited uncomfortably through Jonathan and Evie’s uncomfortable interaction, the manager noted from the back room. Jonathan’s eyes followed Evie’s bottom as she sat the group at a booth and bent over to set some crayons down in front of the kids. Those two were definitely boning.

For once, Jess would like to put together a staff that didn’t dissolve into a Discovery Channel mating season special, but she was beginning to doubt it was even possible. Her legacy as a manager was tarnished with so many soured romances, Jess began to worry it was somehow her own fault. She herself had been dating the owner since about two weeks after she began her job at the Inn.

C'mon, Jess, she told herself in her high-school athlete pep talk voice. You've gotta lead by example. Dating the owner was not such a bad example. They had been together for almost a year and only broke up every other week now. Things were so stable it was downright domestic.

What was it about bringing people fries and pouring beer that made everyone so gosh dang horny?

She probably should've anticipated that Evie and Saraïd, her summer hires, were going to be instigators. The college girls skipped around in their denim shorts and regulation Wayside Inn T-shirts like they ran the place. But Jonathan? Really, Jonathan? Wasn't Jonathan about to buy a house with his girlfriend?

Jess ducked into the kitchen looking for the rest of her staff. She thought she was paying a busboy to work, but the busboy seemed to think he was being paid to take smoke breaks all night long.

"Mike, go clean the basement." She told the kid standing out back through a cloud of smoke.

"I cleaned it yesterday."

"So do some roll-ups."

"The bins are full."

"Mike, go do something, or I'm firing you."

Mike stubbed his cigarette out in a PBR can with an exaggerated groan. Jess waited until he'd left the back porch to light her own, and blew thick clouds of smoke into the rain.

How come the back of the house never had these problems?

Maybe she should hire uglier waitresses. That probably wouldn't help. And it would detract from the clientele who came in to eye her silly college girls. Managing was hard, but Jess took a lot of pride in her little business, and she wasn't going to let her servers spend all night drooling over each other when there was work to be done.

She heard a bell ding in the kitchen and nearly bumped into back waiter Bill as she entered the kitchen.

Bill was the type of person she would never have to worry about hooking up with another staff member. His beard more closely resembled pubes than facial hair, and he got weirdly sweaty every night around 5 p.m. regardless of how busy they were. He was a little slow. He was also her boyfriend's nephew.

Jess steadied herself to avoid touching Bill's dampening skin.

"Sorry, Jess."

"Yeah, no prob," she picked up the ticket. "Two burgers to twelve. Medium rare on the right."

"Yeah." He scuttled off with the food not unlike a crab or that creepy alien thing from the Lord of the Rings.

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Jonathan adjusted the volume on the stereo he'd hooked his phone up to.

"Great song, man," his friend, Sterling, looked up from his chicken caesar wrap and wiped some dressing from the corner of his mouth. "Great album, too."

"Yeah, yeah. We golfing tomorrow, or what?" Jonathan asked, grabbing his friend's empty mug off the bar to refill it with Coors Light.

“Yeah, I could play a couple holes. If this weather ever lets up.”

The bar had filled up despite the rain. They had a few big parties on the floor too.

“Jon, son, could we grab a check?” Jonathan’s favorite regulars asked. He knew them from his job at the bank.

“Yeah, one sec.”

He turned around and saw Evie’s reflection pop up beside him in the bar mirror.

“I need the calculator when you’re done.”

“Yeah. How much is the Monte Cristo?”

“Seven ninety-five.”

He bent down to tally up the check, but he could almost feel her body beside him. She was a magnet. He could smell her perfume. Or shampoo. Or whatever--but damn. How was she so calm?

He didn’t think he should say anything, but he couldn’t help it.

“I’m thinking some late night McDonald’s is in order,” he kept his voice low.

“Ew,” she giggled. “What are you gonna get?”

“I’m gonna get in trouble.”

“How much trouble?”

“A whole lot,” he turned back around to the bar and somehow she was gone before he’d even set the check down.

Buck Hanson, Jonathan’s regular, raised an eyebrow and in a serious voice he usually only used in business said, “Son, what would you do if Kate walked in here right now and saw you looking at that knock out like that.”

“Who? Evie?”

“You know who I’m talking about.”

Jonathan would’ve found Buck more intimidating if he hadn’t been wearing a salmon pink sweater tied around his shoulders.

“We were just talking about the menu.”

“Well, she looked like she wanted to order *off the menu*,” Buck took a money clip out of his pocket and set a few twenties on top of his check. “I’ll see you at the bank, Jon. We’ll talk.”

Jonathan smiled at Mrs. Hanson as they stood up from the bar. He was screwed. Buck was fine, but if he was suspicious, everyone could tell. This was going to get back to Kate.

Sterling pushed his plate away, “Yo, Jon. Is she single?”

At least someone was oblivious. “I’m not sure.”

He wanted to tell Sterling to back off, but he couldn’t. He wanted to tell all the guys he caught checking Evie out to back off, but he couldn’t. He wanted to break up with Kate, but he couldn’t. She’d paid for half the down payment on his car. He worked for her father at the bank. He was so screwed.

Why did he think it was a good idea to have Evie over last weekend? Kate was on vacation with her girl friends while he was working two jobs, and she had still had the balls to call him with a list of chores, not that that was a good excuse.

His landlord had called him an hour after Evie had left, had skipped out of his apartment in last night’s clothes.

“Hey, Jonathan. Would you be able to answer a banking question for me?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Well. Let’s say a man’s had an account with one bank for a few years.”

“Uh huh.”

“And say the government finds out he’s also got another account.”

“Yeah.”

“Is the government obligated to tell the first bank?”

“No... that’s totally legal.”

“I see.”

“Are we talking about accounts?”

“I think you know what we’re talking about.”

“Well, I hope that answered your question,” Jonathan hung up with a sinking pit in his stomach.

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Jess had gone upstairs to the office to order supplies for the kitchen, which made Evie happy. She could only handle being called “hon” so many times in one night. Mike had been cut. Bill had been cut, although he could still be lurking somewhere under a table. The kitchen staff was trickling out. Bummy (a nickname Evie refused to use), the owner, had gone upstairs to fondle Jess.

Evie traded Jonathan her paperwork for her payout. She counted her cash.

“Not a bad night.”

“I always have good nights when I work with you.”

She rolled her eyes, “What’s Kate doing tonight.”

“Visiting her mother.”

“Oh,” she pulled off her T-shirt and stood in only a tank top adjusting her hair in the mirror. “I hate smelling like a fryer all night.”

“I know you’d never be try to distract me.”

“Never.”

“Sterling asked if you were single.”

“He asked for my number too.”

“What? Did you give it to him?”

“Maybe.”

Jonathan counted the drawer, frowning.

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Bill could hear Jonathan and Evie talking in the front of the house. He had ducked into a nook in the kitchen beside the walk-in to refill the sugar caddies. Evie was *supposed* to do them. Again she had stuffed crumbled packets together in no order so Bill was picking up her slack.

Eight sugars. Five Splenda. Five Equal. Five Sweet’N Low. That’s how they were *supposed* to be done. He heard foot steps and didn’t want them to know he’d been listening. He retreated closer to the wall and kept counting. Eight sugars. Five Splenda. Five Equal. Five Sweet’N Low. Clear sections of white, yellow, blue and pink. They looked much better now.

“Evie, I don’t like thinking about you with other guys. You know?”

“Funny, I do know.”

Bill could hear a slur in their voices. He heard them walk up to the time clock and punch out. He heard their breath deepen and the sound of a wet kiss before Jonathan said, “I want to be with you, Evie.”

More mouth to mouth. Bill pressed himself against the cool metal door as they stumbled out. He sang the alphabet once to time himself, then left his hide out to return the sugars to their space under the bar.

He left through the back. The pavement glistened, but the clouds had begun to drift apart. Jess would be down soon to lock up. He patted his pocket to make sure he had his tips and set off for the trailer park. He passed under the Inn's dark neon sign, kicking a large piece of gravel across the road. Why was it called an inn anyway? Maybe it had been once. Now it was just a place to stop by. Not someplace to come back to. The perennials blooming in boxes out front lasted as long as any employee, and twice as long as any employee relationship.

Someday he'd have a big rig like the truckers who ate egg sandwiches in the mornings and drive all day on the routes he'd already memorized. Someday he'd be the type of person who passed through. Like everyone else who'd worked here. Someday he wouldn't be the one that got left behind.