

Twenty-Three/Seven

BY

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The tile is cheap. Poorly laid by a company that placed the lowest bid, and there is plenty of exposed grout. She knows the floor well. It greets her at two in the afternoon, mud streaked and dull, every day. This is the worst part of her day – the very first glimpse of the floor. She crosses the dinning room like playing hopscotch. Right foot green, left foot black. Green, black, green, black, black, start again.

As she punches her numbers into the time clock in the kitchen she taps the sides of the clock four times, four corners making a “Z” pattern. She ties her apron around her fat waist with a familiarity that only comes from decades of practice. The apron is white and starched crisp. It has two pockets on the front. The right one holds her order pad, the left one holds her pens – four of them, all blue.

Peeking around the corner from the kitchen into the dinning room, an hour into her shift, Shellie Robins surveys her tables. The regular crowd. Mac and Julie, the non-tippers, are huddled in a corner booth as usual splitting a slice of apple pie. John sits at the bar wiping up the last of his Salisbury steak with a piece of buttered bread. Jim and Lou never sit in the same place twice or eat the same meal two days in a row.

Lou claims, “you gotta change things up from time to time.” So on Mondays he has a tuna melt with fries. On Tuesdays a tuna melt with chips. Wednesdays with pasta salad.

“Well, what will it be today, potato salad or mashed,” Shellie asks.

“Ah Shellie, I’m unpredictable ya know. I think I’ll try something new. What’s the special today?”

“What do you think the special is, Lou? Isn’t it always the same?”

“Jeez Shellie, I’m only messin’ with ya.”

“Look, I’m busy here,” she says glancing at the empty diner, “do you want fries, pasta, or chips with your tuna melt?”

“Well, you’ve backed me into a corner here. Guess I’ll have

the fries.”

“How about you Jim?”

Shellie could count on Jim’s composure. They dated some years back, and she knew him to be a patient, predictable, and quiet man. She liked him for a while, but he had a terrible knuckle popping habit she just couldn’t take, and he clipped his toenails in front her once. He took the break-up well.

“Let me get the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and water. Oh, and listen Shell, will you please tell him not to cook it too long this time. Last time it was like eating a charcoal brick.”

“I’ll try,” she sighs.

Shellie clicks her pen and shoves it and the order pad back into their familiar pockets. She pulls them back out, clicks the pen again, and places them back into her apron. Then she scuffs around the bar to the order carousel, spins it, and waits.

The minutes pass slowly, drag on like years. Shellie leans on the counter next to the percolating pots and rows of aging meringues and home-style pies.

The bell on the door dings, and a rush of February wind pours through the diner’s double doors. The silent room is engulfed in sudden noise, and every set of eyes swing from its plate to meet a gruff, wind-blown face buried in a gray winter coat.

The whole scene reminds Shellie of the old Westerns her father used to watch. Movies with bars full of outlaws drinking whiskey, fondling women, and cheating at cards all suddenly silenced by the appearance of the town sheriff.

“Order up,” and the whole room returns to normal.

As she passes Shellie does her best to avoid his gaze, but she is immediately curious. She feels his eyes passing over her body, starting at her squeaky corrective shoes up to her too wide waist and saggy ass, before finally resting on her drooping jowl.

“Have a seat, I’ll be with you in a minute,” she says in an uncanny quiet voice.

The stranger clomps across the floor to the seat at the end of the bar, dropping clumps of mud on the newly clean tiles.

Shellie glares at the mud, but she remains quiet and continues over to Jim and Lou’s table.

“What’s the deal Shellie? Not gonna to say anything about your pretty, clean floor? Look at all that mud. Guess you’re gonna have to mop again, huh? What is it four times over?”

“You want to eat or not Lou?”

“Alright sorry Shellie, just had to needle ya. You got a crush or somethin’ on this guy?”

“How can I have something for him when he just came in two minutes ago? I’ll have something for you in a minute, eat your tuna.”

“Not worried about gettin’ a tip are ya?”

Shellie can’t take much more. She shoots him a look over the top of her plastic framed glasses warning him not to say another word.

“Okay, okay, sorry.”

“There you go Jim, everything okay,” Shellie asks dismissing Lou’s apology.

“Yeah, thanks Shell.”

Ignoring everyone else in the diner, she walks over to take the stranger’s order.

“What’s the special today,” he asks.

“Boy, sure can tell you’re not from around here. The special’s the same today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. Fried pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy, and home-style green beans. But nobody ever orders that.”

“Well then, that’s what I’ll have, with a biscuit and some milk.”

“Alright, but no guarantees George’ll remember how to make it. Be up soon.”

“Get me a special George and a biscuit,” says Shellie in her best waitress accent as she spins the order carousel around before returning to her coffee and pie perch.

When the order is finally ready Shellie carries the plate to the man like it is a heart waiting to be transplanted.

“Here you go, today’s special and a glass of milk.”

“Thanks,” the man replies, but to Shellie it comes across more like a grunt than words.

“So you got a name or somethin’,” Shellie asks trying to sound nonchalant.

She stands there waiting for a response, just staring, but nothing ever comes except the sounds of slurping and grease.

“Okay, I’ll be right over there. Just wave when you’re ready for the bill.”

Shellie turns and sees Lou in the corner waving his bill like a frantic pendulum. She rolls her eyes and returns to his table.

“You know Shellie I’ve been coming here for years now, and you were never that nice to me. Never told me nuthin’ ‘bout waving when I was ready to pay. You always make me come up to the counter.”

“Shut up Lou. You two ready to pay now or what?”

“Yeah, here ya go. Have fun with Mister Lovely over there. See ya tomorrow,” and the two men leave the diner with Shellie fuming at their table.

Two hours later, the stranger is still sitting at the end of the bar eating his third plate of pork chops. There is a substantial pile of crumbs and grease accumulating on the counter by his elbows, and he hasn’t bothered to use a napkin once to clean off his face. Shellie is not repulsed, but she is growing concerned that the man may never leave.

“You about finished here,” she asks in courteous but brisk tone.

“Let me get another plate.”

“Going for the world record or what? You know this isn’t the healthiest stuff, and you’re not even finished with the plate you’ve got.”

The room is suddenly silent as the man stops slurping, and his eyes meet Shellie’s.

“Are you my mother? No, get me the goddamn food.”

“Alright, you don’t have to swear. I’m just making small talk.”

“I didn’t come here to make friends with no fat-assed career waitress with nothing else to do but stare at the clock and make chitchat. I came here to eat.”

“Okay, coming up. But just so you know I have to close the place up soon, so you better be done by nine.”

The man tilts his face up again as if to say he’d be done when he felt like it, and Shellie remains silent. But something is stirring within her, unidentifiable at first but growing.

Despite his appetite the man is thin, spindly, and if he shaved his

face Shellie is certain he'd look presentable.

She likes things clean, orderly, in their proper place. She has her quirks. Clean hands, clean floors, whistle a tune, and tap the doorframe four times before entering a room. No stepping on cracks, and a home for her pen. They are quirks, but manageable. This man with his grease and filth and stubble is setting off all of her old ticks, but she can't understand his peculiar appeal. The man exemplifies everything she loathes, and yet she can't help liking him.

Shellie busies herself by checking and rechecking the saltshakers and napkin holders that haven't been touched since the last time she checked them. She calls her constant checking and cleaning, quirks. Her doctor calls them a disorder. Others call them signs of insanity. To Shellie they're manageable. In her mind a disorder only occurs when you have a life to disrupt. Shellie doesn't have a life. Work, sleep, eat, work. Her quirks are what keep her from noticing her wrinkles and accumulating pounds.

Between napkin checks and saltshaker fill-ups Shellie watches the man. He eats like an escaped convict or mental patient. His food remains guarded in the nook of his elbow while his right hand flies from his plate to his mouth over and over again. He wipes grease from the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand and Shellie is entranced.

"Look, its nine o'clock. I've got to clean up before the next shift comes in. Are you done yet?"

"So clean up. I'm not stopping you."

"You're sitting in a huge pile of filth and grease. You're what I need to clean up."

"Let someone else deal with that, mop you're damn floor, fill up the salt shakers no one has used, or do something else."

"I can't let you stay in here when the diner's not open."

"Of course you can."

"Do you just like to come into restaurants and push people around or something?"

"Restaurant? There's a difference between a restaurant and a diner. Restaurants have hostesses and waiters, busboys and specialized dishes – grouper alfredo, meatless lasagna, and shrimp primavera not fried pork chops. This is a diner. Don't delude

yourself.”

“I’m not deluding myself.”

“You’re what fifty? You work in a diner in Georgia. You’ve been doing it for decades. You have no idea what you’re doing with your life.”

“I know what I’m doing with my life. I’m working, I’m living, I’m kicking you out,” she says growing increasingly hostile.

“You won’t kick me out. You don’t have the nerve, and you like me too much. You girls always like people who hate you. Lifetime waitresses.”

“Why did you come in here? Trying to save my life? I don’t need saving. I know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t think you do. I’ve been watching you watch me all night. Clicking your pen, playing games with the floor, whistling your tunes, and the damn tapping. I’ve seen you mess up your hopscotch game and you don’t always tap the same number of times. Hell, sometimes, if you think no one is looking, you don’t bother to tap at all. You’re a fake. Everyone thinks your crazy here in this little town. You’ve got them all convinced. I can see you for what you are. A phony and a loser.”

Shellie can’t take it any longer. She no longer likes this man, she loves him for the few seconds it takes to pull him towards her and kiss his greasy lips.

Their lips come together suddenly with a force stronger than anything Shellie has ever felt before, like gravity and the big bang as one. The kiss doesn’t last long, but when they pull apart she glistens with pork chop happiness.

The man doesn’t acknowledge her kiss or her sudden glee. He only turns his head again to his plate.

Shellie stands in front of him gaping and wondering if their exchange really occurred. Finally and she turns toward the bucket and mop at the end of the bar.

An hour later, the floor is gleaming once again. Shellie unlocks the doors, and the man walks out without a word and no tip, leaving dried mud cakes on her newly cleaned floor. She sighs, pulls out the mop, and starts again. Four more times and she’ll be done.