



an order  
of  
*Coffee*  
and *Tears*

brian spangler

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# An Order of Coffee and Tears

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a novel

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ISBN: 978-0-9852255-2-0 (eBook)

ISBN: 978-0-9852255-3-7 (print)

Editing by Mikaela Pederson

[mikaela@a-step-up-editing.com](mailto:mikaela@a-step-up-editing.com)

Editing by Don Shope

[dshope100@gmail.com](mailto:dshope100@gmail.com)

Cover art by Streetlight Graphics

<http://streetlightgraphics.com>

## DEDICATION

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To my friends and family for their support and patience.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While working on this novel, there were several who I owe a terrific level of gratitude and appreciation. Thank you for reading many drafts of the novel and for offering critiques and encouragement – your feedback has helped to shape the story. Gabby, Ms. Potts, Suzette and all the rest, thank you too.

To Monica Spangler, Jenn Steiger, Susan Spangler and Jenn Bell for providing terrific feedback and helping me recognize the potential of the story.

To Don Shope and Evelyn Shope for reading later drafts and providing outstanding story suggestions and edits.

To Kay Bratt – A special thank you for all the time and support you gave in contributing and helping make this novel what it is.

Miserable Mondays. That is what I called days like these – gray skies and a cold northeast wind biting at your skin. Thick sheets of rain drummed against the glass front of the diner where I worked as a waitress. Through the red letter print of Angela's Diner, the outside view of cars and buildings was a lively blur, stretched and pulled by the rainfall.

I missed Texas. Home. Sure, it had its share of cold wet days, but with the warm gulf air, you rarely ever felt the chill. Big-city air is different. The chill here reached your bones and sometimes settled in them for the season. Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love (not sure why they call it that) the city I called home now – has been for the last year, anyway. Angela's Diner is what folks liked to call a 'throwback.' *A welcome carry-over*, some of my regulars said. I was told the small restaurant was an original Jerry O'Mahoney Dining car that had been bumped out years before. Who built the diner and where it came from wasn't much of a concern – at least not when I first came upon it. Homeless and hungry, the *Help Wanted* sign in the window was all that mattered to me – well, that and the smell of food escaping the door.

My name is Gabriella Santiago, but only my mother calls me Gabriella. To everyone else, I'm just Gabby. I didn't grow up wanting to be a waitress. I doubt most of those who wait tables do. Home for me was growing up in the heart of Texas – the heart of country. There I lived with my daddy and my momma, who were as vanilla average as the houses on our street. Good people. Good family. And, I suppose, I was average too. I was a typical teenager. I dressed my bed with stuffed animals, like other girls. I taped posters on my walls, like other girls. I even let Tommy Grudin go to second base with me while playing a game of truth or dare, like other girls.

There was a time when I had more about me to tell, but who I was once is only a glimpse of who I am. Much of my past is a blur – most of it, from my own doing. Somewhere between that first kiss and cheerleading tryouts, I lost my way. I left home in a run and never looked back. I'm twenty-six now, and a lot of things have happened since the day I felt Tommy Grudin's eager fingers fumbling beneath my sweater. From time to time, I think about that part of my life – usually, though, I stay here today, since that is all we really have.

Closing my eyes, I listened to the eerie voice of the diner. A hollow emptiness. I found it unsettling. I forced a memory of the diner as I'd first seen it, like a carnival put up in a groomed field. It was bustling and beautiful. My eyes were lost in the silvery steel, and the shades of green panel decorations, and the neon lights glinting off the glass. I think I might have giggled. In fact, I'm sure I did. The diner looked out of place next to the modern buildings. Almost as though someone forgot it was there, and built an entire new city around it. Maybe that was the appeal it had. Maybe that's why it looked so warm and full of life and persuaded me to want to go inside.

When I opened the diner's door that first time, the smell of coffee and waffles and chicken and everything else that is good to eat hit me like a cozy breeze. Inside, the diner was abuzz with sound and sights of dishes and dinnerware clanking, people laughing and talking. With nearly every seat taken, the booths along the windows were full. Children played with the mini-jukeboxes at the end of their tables as their families stirred coffee and sipped at milkshakes from tall fountain glasses. Round metal seats with greenish-yellow vinyl tops sprouted up through the floor like dandelions in spring. Two counters, separated by an old mechanical cash register, were covered with the perched elbows of folks dining alone. While the memory was fleeting, it was good and it warmed me inside.

That *Help Wanted* sign saved my life. I know that sounds odd, but it's true. I'd pulled the sign from the window and handed it to a hard looking waitress, whose name tag read, Ms. Potts.

remember how she shifted her feet and punched her hand to her hip before giving me a long steady look. ~~When her eyes fell to my Chuck Taylor sneakers they stayed there. I was on the streets back then and my sneakers were thready, tattered and worn, much like me. And I remember the self-conscious pinch of embarrassment in my gut as I pulled one of my feet behind the other. A small miracle happened then: Ms. Potts kept the *Help Wanted* sign and Angela's Diner kept me. Miracles aren't always a grand happening like the kind I learned about in Sunday school. Sometimes they're as small as giving someone a break. I went into the diner that night, and since then, my life has never been the same.~~

Ms. Potts and I work the three-to-three shift most every day. We're a good team, but admittedly didn't start out that way. I wasn't just bad. I was terrible. I didn't know a bus-pan from a black and white, or a pick-up from a clean-up. There is patience, and then there is whatever it is that Ms. Potts is made of. Unlike me, she is younger than some and older than most. But that doesn't stop her from running the place, something she's been doing for a very long time.

Ms. Potts sat across from me, working a crossword, and seemed to be oblivious to the empty diner and heavy rains. She huffed an objection to a word she'd penciled and then stabbed an eraser at the paper. Her blue hair was home to a few more pencils, and her biggish glasses sat perched near the tip of her nose as she scratched a new word into the paper boxes. Turning toward the back of the diner, I expected to find Clark's large silhouette, his broad shoulders moving as if in a dance while he worked the grill to fill orders. But there were no orders. None. Clark's figure was absent and I thought he might be snoozing on his cot. He had a small bed, which was cramped into the back room; a small area that was all his. When he wasn't working the grill or helping clean the front, or doing anything else, you'd find him back there sometimes reading, sometimes praying, and most times sleeping.

Listening past the rain and wind hitting the window, I could hear the soft static hisses and pops of the Jeopardy game show theme song. It was Clark's portable black and white RCA Television. On the best of days, that little TV could get eight channels. Today, my guess was that the Philly locals were the limit: stations like three, six, and ten. And from the sounds of it, even Jeopardy was fading in and out.

Earlier, we'd seen a couple of our regulars who were off to their night jobs for the evening. For the day, I counted just a few dollars in my waist apron and felt the round imprints of a quarter, maybe two. When you work at a diner, your tip money, more often than not, might be the same change you're giving back. *When it's time to lean, it's time to clean*, I heard in my head – a favorite saying of the owner. And this diner was clean. Washed on the inside, and, squinting a look through the ever-changing mural of our front window, it was clearly washed on the outside, too.

When I turned back to check the progress on the crossword, Ms. Potts was looking at me. No, she was staring. The interest she had in her puzzle was lost. Maybe she'd come across a word she didn't know, or maybe she'd finished it. But then a few seconds passed. And then a few more. Uneasiness settled in me and I shifted in my seat. Uncomfortable. Who likes to be stared at?

A heavy wash of rain hit against the window, pulling my eyes away from Ms. Potts. I saw a few blurred and distorted rain parkas, and some umbrellas racing by the diner. One of the umbrella figures, a bright yellow that stood out loud against all the gray, slowed, and then stopped. *A customer*, I thought, and got ready to stand. But the yellow umbrella figure adjusted something, and then continued walking until it disappeared into the heavy weather. When I turned back to face Ms. Potts, she was still staring.

For a moment, a terrible thought crossed my mind. I thought that maybe Ms. Potts had died right there across from me. She'd had a heart-attack, or a massive stroke, and the last thing she'd seen in this world was me. I didn't move. For another moment, I didn't move. But then the thought of her

dying started to become more real, and I leaned in a bit as concern for her grew. When she blinked her eyes, I jumped. ~~While it startled me, my heart lifted, as a small relief settled in the form of a quiet sigh.~~ The good thing was that I knew she was okay. But she continued to stare. Finally, I raised my eyebrows and shrugged my shoulders.

“What is it? Do I have something on my face?” Her stare broke.

She put her hands back on the table, and asked, “Girl, how long you been here?” Her expression remained fixed and stroke-like. I waited to see her display that familiar smile, or to see her fix her glasses before they slid too far down her nose. But she didn’t do either. And I think I knew where she was going, and that made me more uncomfortable than her staring had. This time, I didn’t have to let the heavy rain against the window pull my eyes. I forced myself to turn away from her and watched a few who braved the harsh weather passed by the diner.

“Gabby? Hunny, I’m just asking a question,” she began in a softer, but more inquisitive, tone. “You’ve been with us a year, and I ain’t never heard you say a word about family. We all got some family... somewhere. But never a word,” she finished.

“But you’re my family. You and Clark.”

“Sure, sure – we’s family. But what about your own mother and father? You say they alive, you just never talk about ‘em. They’re your family, Gabby. And I’m sure they miss you. I know I would.”

This wasn’t the first time Ms. Potts had questions for me. She’d wondered before, and asked a few times. And, as before, I didn’t like it. What’s in the past stays in the past. By now, I’d shared where I was from, and that I hadn’t been home or in touch with my parents in a long time.

Almost ten years had passed since I’d talked to anyone from my hometown. Ten years. That’s double digits. I’d never considered that length of time until now. I was just sixteen when I left. Leaving wasn’t a decision that came lightly. Leaving wasn’t even a question or consideration I had that morning. I can still remember waking up in my old room that day, my dog at the end of my bed, the warm sun on my face, and the feeling of the comforter that I’d rolled myself up in. By the afternoon, all of our lives had changed forever, and, by the time the sun was setting, I knew I had to leave. There was no question. As the day ended, Texas grounds were under my feet for the last time, and I never looked back.

Before I could stop it, before I could control it, before I even really knew it had started, I was crying. And I was mad. Mad at Ms. Potts for driving me to cry in front of her. Mad at her for digging again. Mad that she was looking for something that I’d buried. I had buried my past a long time ago. I’d buried my memories, and the people in them, too. And what people choose to bury should always stay buried.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. I just want to know what happened, is all,” she said, reaching across the table to hold my hands. I didn’t pull my hands back. I wanted to, but I didn’t. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had held my hands, or even touched me. Had it been ten years? Surely it couldn’t have been. It was this last thought that got me crying again. I just shook my head no, no, no, and fixed my eyes on Ms. Potts, pleading for her to not dig anymore. Not now. Not yet.

“Okay, baby. I understand. Gabby, I ain’t never had no one to call one of my own, but I come to think of you as close as I’ll get. I love you, girl – just want what is best for you,” she finished, and rubbed my hands in hers. I pushed a breath out and felt a shudder from a tear as it went cold on my cheek.

When I was ready, I asked, “Why? Why do you need to know?” Ms. Potts stopped rubbing my hands. Her mothering eyes changed. She turned in Clark’s direction, and then back to me, her expression now stale and flat.

“Because, Gabby, I know how your past can drive you. Drive it every damn day God wills you to have breath to live. I know it,” she said, and squeezed my hand.

It was my turn to look to Clark, but he was still in the back, watching his little TV. Ms. Pot pulled on my hands. She took my chin in her fingers so that my eyes met hers.

“Listen to me, girl, you gotta face your secrets. Secrets ain’t free – you gotta face 'em, or else you gonna be running from them the rest of your life,” she cautioned. And that is when I knew, I knew in my heart that my new home, my new family – they had secrets, too.



“Order of coffee and tears!” I called out when a familiar sight caught my eyes. I’d first met Suzette Wilkerson about a year ago. It was an early winter day much like today; with short afternoons and cold evenings, putting frost on everything as a reminder of what was to come. I remember the first day, not just because Suzette held her arm to protect two broken ribs, but because she was beautiful – in a delicate way. A waterfall of red hair played a perfect complement to her porcelain skin. Not quite reaching her mid-twenties, she held a striking pose that was tall and willowy. I recalled yelling out for an order of coffee and tears, just as I had moments ago. And like before, Suzette looked out of sorts. No, she looked hurt.

My heart sank. All I could think was, *not again*. Her eyes were red and heavy with the same glassy tears this afternoon that had been there that first day. But today, she wasn’t holding her arm to protect broken ribs. Today, I could see errant locks of hair stuck to the side of Suzette’s face and her left cheek rising to a shine, a blackish-purple lump. The kind you get from the back of a hand. A man’s hand.

Suzette paused before stepping up onto the side-walk. She found me through the large glass window. Past the pock-mark remains of raindrops and the lettering of the diner’s name, I watched as she tried to clear her eyes and push her lips into a smile. She struggled to fix her coat, which appeared to have been put on in a rush. Not just a rush, but a run from her home. She tried to hold her smile another moment, and even attempted a wave of her hand. But, when she began to tear up again, she let her coat fall open as she lowered her head and cried, defeated.

“Girl b-been hit again,” I heard from behind me. “You can see it p-plain as plain from here.” Clark went on to say, as he worked the diner’s grill.

“Mmm-hmm. She needs to get away from that man,” Ms. Potts followed. Pouring a cup of coffee, she continued, “How much the girl gonna take? It only get worse... never better.” Without looking up, Ms. Potts finished pouring, and turned to me with hard eyes, “It ain’t never gonna get better,” she concluded in a stern voice.

“I know,” I nodded and waved for Suzette to come in before she completely broke down. Suzette pulled the front of her coat closed and hurried to the door. The bell above the diner’s entrance rang once as the smell of damp December air followed her inside.

“Hi, Gabby,” Suzette struggled to get out.

“Not a word, hunny – just sit a spell,” I offered. But I could see she needed to talk. She needed to spill the bad that had happened to her so that the good left behind would make her feel better. I did the only thing I knew to do for her: I fixed her a cup of coffee. By now, I knew just how she took it.

Pushing my hand across the counter, I offered Suzette a napkin. When she looked up at me, she motioned a circle around my mouth. A small thread of blood crept from the corner of her lips and was threatening to travel toward her chin. Suzette was hurting. Probably more on the inside than the black and purple bruising showed on the outside. When I saw confusion and uncertainty in her eyes, I motioned with my hand again. A few of the diner’s patrons were stretching their necks – their eyes strained and reaching to see what was going on with the woman who’d cried a flurry of words before heavy sobs settled in. I didn’t want to pull any more attention in our direction.

Suzette nodded and fixed me a look full of humiliation. With her eyes watering, she ran the white linen over her trembling lip. She cleaned her mouth of the blood, which revealed a split in her lower lip. It was beginning to swell. Ms. Potts pulled another napkin and filled it with ice. The chunky sound of ice cubes thumped the counter as she placed it in front of Suzette.

“Need to get some ice on that lip – cool the heat that’s pushing the blood to swell. Cold will help.”

keep it from bruising you,” Ms. Potts offered. Lifting the large frame of her eye-glasses, she glimpsed the purple and red skin rising around Suzette’s eye, and continued, “Can’t help much with the shine of your eye, though, but may bring down some of that bump.”

Wiping more blood onto the napkin, Suzette cringed and said, “I’ll never get used to the taste of blood.” When she reached to pick up the ice-pack, Ms. Potts took Suzette’s hand in hers and held it there. Suzette lifted her chin.

“Hunny – you shouldn’t have to. Nobody should,” Ms. Potts answered in a soft tone, and placed the ice-pack fully in Suzette’s open hand. Suzette looked as though she’d start crying again, but then she caught one of the sobs and choked it away before lifting the ice to cradle her chin.

“I know...” Suzette started, and then stopped to settle the shudder in her voice. “He’s not a bad man. Really, he’s not. I can’t even remember the last time...” she continued, but her voice faded and her stare dropped to the coffee in front of her. Ms. Potts raised her brow and shook her head. We’ve heard the same before. Many times. At least a dozen times, in fact, during my last year of working at Angela’s. I wondered just how many times Ms. Potts and Clark heard the same before I joined them.

There was always a pattern, and I knew what was next. Suzette was going to defend her husband James Wilkerson. She’d tell us how it was her fault, or how his bad day was allowance enough to be laid on her. She was going to try and explain it away. Just explain it away with words she assumed were acceptable. No more questions. No concern. But we couldn’t do that. We never could. We’d listen and offer a console, and, time and time again, we’d give her the phone numbers of folks who could step in and offer help.

“How long?” I questioned. My voice pulled her eyes up from her coffee.

“What?” she asked. “How long for what?”

“How long since the last time he hurt you?” I repeated. Suzette shook her head, surprised by the question.

“A month, or more? Maybe?”

It was my turn to take Suzette’s hand in mine. Her skin was cold, and her fingers were thinner than they should have been. I realized what I’d missed when she first came in, but now I could see it. She’d lost weight. Her skin was pale, her face tight against her cheeks. As anyone would do, my immediate thoughts were of sickness. A bug, or flu, or God forbid something worse. But then I considered how she lived day to day, every day. The anxiety that she carried inside her was like a hot stone that burned with the rise and fall of her husband’s hand. Just the thought of how she felt inside when hearing the front door open made something stir inside me. It felt like fear, and an odd pressure that turned my legs jiggly. *Anxiety is eating her up. How can she live like that?* I struggled to understand it, but couldn’t.

Four marks, in the shape of flower petals, dressed Suzette’s arm. They were the colors of autumn brown with threads of summer green. Only, the marks weren’t the petals of spring flowers, they were the bruised places where her husband’s fingers had gripped her. They were no more than a week old.

“And these?” I motioned, and then continued, “How does your shoulder feel? If I turn your hand over, will I find one more?” Suzette put on a frown and darted shame-filled eyes to Ms. Potts, then back to me. For a second, I was tempted to turn her hand in mine and reveal the larger thumb-print bruise, leaving nothing to question. Suzette pulled her hand back and tucked it away under the counter. *Please*, she asked with her eyes. Ms. Potts brought over more coffee and refreshed Suzette’s cup.

“It’s okay, hunny. It’s okay. Just sit a while longer,” she offered. And before I could say a word more, I saw, from the corner of my eye, a coffee mug hanging high above a booth. With fingers looped on the cup’s handle, an older gentleman wearing a grime-stained *Keep on Truckin’* baseball cap motioned for some fresh coffee.

“Better tend to your table,” Ms. Potts said, handing me the coffee. I turned back to Suzette and

stopped. In that moment, a pang of guilt bit me as I considered how I must have made her feel. I didn't mean to make her feel worse. I just wanted her to see the truth.

"I'm sorry, Suzy – stay a while?" I pleaded. She nodded and pushed a smile, but then quickly reclaimed it as the swollen cut in her lip caused her to frown. When I reached *Keep on Truckin'*, I pitched his hat and lowered his cup.

"Ma'am," he said, and gave an appreciative look as I poured the coffee. He was a regular, and still called me "ma'am." A dozen times I'd told him he could call me Gabby, but he never changed his ways. I thought that was sweet.

"My apologies, and thank you for being patient," I said, and gave him one of my better *waitress* smiles.

"No problem. I didn't want to call out, given the circumstances," he started, and brought the cup up to his lips. "Fresh smell of coffee got the best of me, though. Always will," he chortled, and sucked in the steam dancing just above his cup. Another sip, and he rested his cup back in front of him.

"Your friend gonna be okay?" he asked, his smile fading to concern.

"If we can get her to stay a while, then I think she'll be fine, and –" I never finished what I wanted to say. The bell over the door interrupted, sounding twice as the door opened, and then closed. Suzette didn't wait. She didn't stay. Another pang of guilt bit me, regret beginning to join it. I should have let the petal-shaped bruises go. I didn't need to prove a point.

When I looked over to Ms. Potts, she only offered a shrug of her shoulders. I'd hoped this time that maybe Suzette would have stayed. I'd hoped this time that she'd let us make some phone calls for her. I'd hoped – we'd *all* hoped – she wouldn't leave again, only to come back broken and sad, possibly not come back at all.

Turning back to *Keep on Truckin'*, I finished, "I suppose we won't know, now."

"Shame, such a pretty girl, too," he started, and then picked up his coffee and continued, "I'll pray for her. We can do that much, can't we?" he said with a shallow smile. I returned a polite enough smile, but didn't want to. The regret was replaced by frustration, which was an all too familiar feeling. Walking back to Ms. Potts, I considered the past year. We'd see Suzette from time to time. Some visits came with smiles and talk of going back to school and moving on. Other visits were like today where the bruises cried for her. How many times had Suzette sat on the same stool, bleeding? How many times? *I'll pray for her. We can do that much, can't we?* I heard in my head.

“An order of coffee and tears!” Ms. Potts sang out, as the bell above the door rang, and echoed over our heads. A few girls – maybe thirteen or fourteen years old – pushed in through the door, and stood at the center of the diner. Shaking off the cold and wet snow, they clutched their arms in a hug to try and warm themselves.

We don’t always call out “Coffee and Tears.” I’d come to learn that we save that call for special occasions. Working at the diner from the late afternoon through the early hours of the next day, you see a lot of things. Some of them are funny, some sad. But most of all, you see those who, by chance or by luck, find themselves at Angela’s Diner, ordering coffee, and, soon after, crying. Might be a bad breakup, or a lost job, or even the death of a parent or child; we’ve seen and shared a lot of stories. I like to think of ourselves as the diner restaurant equivalent of a five-cent therapy. We’ll give you the coffee, you supply the tears, and, in return, you’ll get an ear that will listen.

I recognized the uniform the girls wore – dark maroon skirts that came all the way up and over white blouses with blue jackets dressed around their shoulders. The girls were from the all-girls school a block or so away. And, just a few blocks in the opposite direction was their partner school, the all-boys preparatory school. The two schools collaborated a few times a year to hold dances. At the only diner within a few blocks, we had the privilege of getting the school rush after the dances. On those nights, we’d need twenty hands to help us with the wall-to-wall teenagers swamping the diner. I’m not sure what the occupancy limit is for our little place, but we never counted. It was always wonderful, but I enjoyed the kids. And I always felt a little sad when the night ended, as though I were trying to reclaim a little of something I missed.

Today was different. It was cold and turning rainy, and the shortest of the three girls looked like she had been already crying a steady run of tears. She was a pretty girl with ruddy freckles across her nose to match her brown hair, and a row of braces I could see as she argued with the tallest of the three girls.

The tallest girl was the one they followed. She was the first to enter the diner and to pick a place to stand. I knew the type, and I think almost immediately that I didn’t much care for her. Looking around the diner, she caught my eye, and I expected she’d give a nod for some seats and menus. But she didn’t. And I thought there must be one more. As the leader of the group, she wasn’t ready to sit down. There was someone they were waiting for.

The third girl, a red-head who I thought looked a little like Suzette, didn’t seem to be engaged in all the back and forth of the first two girls. Rocking on her feet, heel to toe, and gripping her school backpack, she seemed almost bored. Her eyes wandered around the diner with an interest in looking everywhere, but without looking anywhere. When the bell chimed and the door opened, number four came in to join the first three. Number four wore straight jet black hair, and if not for the loss of an inch or two in her height, she could easily have been the girl that the others followed. Soon after joining her friends, all four girls were together, and Blonde looked over to me and Ms. Potts.

“You want this one?” I asked, almost pleaded, with Ms. Potts. She gave the girls a quick look up and down, and then shook her head a stout “no.”

“Coffee and tears is all that’ll be there, fairly certain of it – I’m not up for teeny-girl storytelling. All yours, go get ‘em,” she answered.

“Really, are you sure? Are you sure you’re not interested?” I joked and laughed. But Ms. Potts held her face firm – eventually I saw a smile and heard a giggle as I picked up some menus and started walking toward the girls. By now, they’d selected their own booth and seated themselves. Or, should I say, Blonde did the seat selection, pointing out who should sit where.

“You sit here. And you sit there, and I’ll sit here – of course, and, well... you can sit next to me” I heard her say as I approached.

“Afternoon, can I get you girls started with anything to drink?” I asked as I handed them each a menu.

“Four coffees, please,” Blonde ordered for the group. Red, who looked the youngest, crinkled her nose and put on a face that told me she wanted something else.

“Is there something else I can get for you?” I asked, directing my words to Red. She raised her eyes and started to smile, but then turned in Blonde’s direction. Blonde fixed a thinly veiled frown on Red, and while the glimpse lasted only a second, I recognized the power of it. Growing up, we’ve all had one of *those* friends. Black toyed with her hair, running long fingers through it, and snapped her gum, which cracked and popped as she chewed the air out of it.

“Oh, stop –” Black started, “How about four coffees and two chocolate milks? Please.” Black gave Red a smile.

“That’s fine – four coffees, *and* some chocolate milk,” Blonde followed in a tone that sounded condescending and mean.

“And two straws, please,” Red insisted.

“Really? Again with the two?” Blonde scolded. Red straightened her shoulders defensively.

“Has to be two, otherwise the first one will be lonely.” When Red finished her explanation, Black began laughing, and didn’t seem to care that Blonde gave her a look that said to stay out of it. Black’s lower lip pooched out as she shook squinted eyes at Blonde. I felt like I was going to start laughing right there – but I didn’t.

“Can we get three chocolate milks?” the girl who was crying asked in a sparrow-like voice. I had to lean in close to hear what she asked when she repeated her order. Blonde rolled her eyes, and before then, I expected no less. Blonde passed another disapproving look around to the three other girls before her eyes settled on me.

“We’ll have *four* coffees and *four* chocolate milks,” she requested, a smile of her own breaking through. *I guess the truth is in the order.*

“I’m gonna mix some of mine together – like an iced mocha coffee,” Red said to nobody in particular, and giggled. “How about you, what are you going to do?” Red asked Brown, who’d already lost interest, and turned her eyes back to the table.

That is when the crying started again. Almost without pause, Brown began to bawl. Her freckles disappeared in the red that lifted through her cheeks. I looked over to Ms. Potts, but by now, she was gone to the back to work with Clark, or watch *Wheel of Fortune* with him. And I wished I could, too. I’d seen my share of shed tears in the booths, but never from someone this young. I hated to admit it, but I was nervous. There were no words that came to me. No wisdom or clever sayings. Nothing.

“I’ll be back with your order,” I heard myself say, and felt ashamed that I didn’t say something more. Anything at all that might help Red. On days when Suzette would come to us broken and hurt, I felt that I knew what to say. I knew what to do. But this afternoon, I didn’t know. Not a clue. As Blonde began pulling together glasses of chocolate milk, Ms. Potts grabbed a glass to lend a hand.

“Poor girl’s a mess. So, is it a breakup? Ditched by a boy? What’s the story?” she asked, her eyes eager to hear more, as though this were an afternoon soap we never got to watch. After all, it was Clark’s portable TV – game shows, and sometimes a news show. Nothing more.

“I don’t know, yet. She just started crying.”

“Young girls. Could be anything. We was young once, too,” Ms. Potts laughed, and then she continued, “And you still is,” she finished, and patted my back.

The crying slowed by the time I placed the glasses of chocolate milk and cups of coffee in front of the girls. Brown’s cheeks were stained with tears that continued a steady flow, like the rains outside.

Some of the tears fell from her cheeks onto the table, leaving behind tear craters that reached out every direction. I watched as one fell onto her school uniform, where it disappeared into the blue tweed of her jacket.

“Hunny, you okay?” I asked. While the order might have been the usual coffee and tears, the chocolate milk was indeed a better fit. Through the sobs, Brown was eagerly sucking down the chocolate milk. From my count, she saved only a sip or two for the coffee.

“We don’t *know*,” Blonde jumped in. Her voiced was gruff and meant to sound annoyed. “None of us know what’s going on, do we?” she continued, almost reprimanding Brown for not telling them why she was crying.

“Really?” Black and Red pitched their voices, berating in near unison. “When she wants to tell us... *if* she wants to tell us, then she will,” Black finished, and pitched up her coffee cup in the same direction, asking for more. Unlike her friend, Brown, Black was enjoying the coffee.

Curiosity was getting the better of me, and I didn’t want to leave before hearing what the story was. From the amount of crying, I was already guessing it had something to do with a boy. From the rain pelting the front of the diner’s window, to Clark’s shuffling of spatulas, pots, and pans, Angela’s is a small diner, and sometimes, thankfully, the sounds carry to all corners. As I turned for the coffee pot, Ms. Potts was already standing by my side, coffee pot in hand.

“Coffee?” she asked with a smile that I thought spoke more of genuine interest and curiosity than politeness. Ms. Potts winked at me. She wanted to hear the story, too.

“Thank you,” Black started to say, but then the tears interrupted again, and Brown’s face turned into a mess that she pushed into the palms of her hands.

Blonde leaned up in her seat, and yelled, “You see? This is what she’s been doing all day. And she won’t tell us what’s wrong.” Ms. Potts raised her hand and motioned a polite “settle down.”

Brown dropped her hands hard onto the table. Coffee cups jumped and spilled over, spoons rattled in their empty chocolate milk glasses.

“I’m pregnant, OKAY?” Brown hollered, and pushed her face back into her hands.

I jumped along with the other girls when I heard Brown yell. And when I realized what she’d said, my heart felt heavy, and I thought it skipped for a moment, while I tried to catch a breath that wouldn’t come. Suddenly, I had a memory from a lifetime ago, but it passed as Ms. Potts moved forward to kneel next to Brown. Her knees sounded a loud pop as she made her way down so their eyes were near level. I remained standing. By now, I had the coffee pot in my hand and had refreshed each cup, whether the girls needed it or not. I wasn’t leaving.

“Girl, are you certain?” Ms. Potts asked, as she laid her hand on the young girl’s back.

“Yes... well, *I think* I am. Jimmy thinks I am, too, and now he won’t even talk to me,” Brown struggled to say, as a stutter of air caught her words. All the girls were listening now. Red stayed busy, her lips pursed on the two straws as she pulled more chocolate milk from the glass. Blonde and Black both exchanged sweeteners and creamers for their coffee.

“Wait,” Blonde started to say. She put her coffee down and leaned forward. “Jimmy? Jimmy who?” All motion and sounds stopped as Brown sat as far back against the booth’s seat as she could. Her face emptied of expression, and the red in her cheeks disappeared. She gave an undecided nod and pushed her eyes down to the coffee she’d left to go cold.

“My Jimmy?” Blonde squealed. Red quickened the emptying of her chocolate milk, and, for a moment, I thought her eyes were going to fall out of her head. Propped up on her elbows, Black cradled her coffee in her hands. She disguised an eager smile behind her cup as she listened to her friend’s revelation.

“Jimmy Taylor,” Brown finally whispered.

“Really? I mean, really!” Blonde scolded, and slapped the silverware and coffee cups into another

dance atop the table.

~~“I’m so sorry. I am. Jimmy said you and him were broken up, and then he called me, and then v~~  
started to hang, and then...” Brown stopped mid-sentence and began to tear up again.

“And then what? What? What happened?” Red’s excited voice blurted in anticipation.

“We DID it!” Brown shouted. “Okay? Or, we sorta did it,” she told her friends. By now, Blonde  
was fighting a tear. She held a narrow and hurtful stare on Brown.

Ms. Potts shifted on her feet and raised her hand again to quiet the girls. When all that we cou  
hear were the sounds of the rain hitting the window, and Red’s sucking down the last of her chocola  
milk, Ms. Potts asked,

“Girl, do you mind if I ask you something? Might help. Might not.” Brown darted looks aroun  
the table, and then nodded an okay. Ms. Potts blinked an acknowledgment, and continued, “Can yo  
whisper in my ear what you and this Jimmy Taylor *did* do?” Brown hesitated. She searched the fac  
of her friends. First, she looked to Red, and then to Black, and, finally, she looked to Blonde. H  
friends wore expressions filled with sympathy and fear and excitement, much excitement – except f  
Blonde. Brown leaned closer to Ms. Potts, and cupped her hand around her mouth and confessed. B  
with this confession, there wouldn’t be the reciting of seven Lord’s Prayers and ten Hail Marys as pa  
of washing away your sin. Instead, just the smiles and laughs of Ms. Potts.

“Girl, you fine. Now, don’t get me wrong. You young, your boyfriend young, and you bot  
shouldn’t be doing anything more than hand-holding, and maybe some kissing.”

“I’m not pregnant?” Brown asked, a smile breaking free for the first time since she entered th  
diner.

“Girl, you’re not pregnant. But I do expect you to have more explaining to do with your friends  
Ms. Potts finished, and turned a hand to me to help her up. Her knees popped a few more times, but  
was her laughter that caught my attention. Brown turned back to her friends, whose eyes were hung  
for the details of their friend’s near-pregnancy experience with one Jimmy Taylor. Brown’s smil  
faded when she turned to Blonde. There would, indeed, be some details to explain, possibly over mo  
coffee and chocolate milk.

“So, what was it?” I had to ask. But Ms. Potts didn’t stop walking until we were in the back wi  
Clark. Once we reached Clark, she let out a hearty laugh and clapped her hands together.

“They was just fooling around – nobody gonna have a baby with what they was doing. Poor gi  
naive about the *birds and bees*, is all, there’s always one who is. Truth is, poor Jimmy Taylor gonn  
get both his ears chewed up once those two girls are done with him.” Ms. Potts belted another laug  
and then turned back with me to look at the table. Black and Red were wide-eyed and listening  
Brown and Blonde, going back and forth about a boy named Jimmy Taylor.

I tried to laugh, along with Ms. Potts. I did. I tried to hear the humor in it all, but the fright an  
terror I had heard in Brown’s voice, and had seen on her face... well, it hit home. Seeing Brown th  
afternoon scratched a memory bubble that had been buried long ago. Memory bubbles can surface.  
was sure I’d pushed it deep enough. I was sure of it. But, I suppose, nothing stays buried forever.

Ten minutes. It had been more than ten minutes since Ms. Potts walked to the back to have a discussion with the owner of Angela's Diner. This wasn't just odd, it was downright curious. We only saw Mr. Thurmon a few days a month, and usually those days fell on Friday. This was Wednesday. While I continued working tables, Clark kept to the grill and called out pick-up after pick-up. I kept my eyes on what I was doing, and on the orders I was taking, but I have to admit that the work was more of just a distraction. I wanted to know what was being said.

When I could, I'd walk across the diner so that I could spy a glance to the back room with the hopes of seeing what was happening. Passing by a few times, I found Ms. Potts and Mr. Thurmon exchanging words. And on one pass, Ms. Potts caught me mid-stride and shooed me away, her face scrunched with annoyance as the sound of the towel in her hand whipped at the air. Clark seemed impervious to it all. Not one time did I see him looking over his shoulder, or trying to lean in with his ear. Not a care – nothing. I suppose I was just curious enough for the two of us; that is what I told myself, anyway.

During our shift, we ran the diner, but we didn't own Angela's Diner. Angela Thurmon was the original owner. And from what I've been told, she built and breathed the diner after her husband died. It was her baby. She said she built Angela's because she wanted to work something good and steady. She said that if there is a business to spend your days working, then you might as well pick one that everyone needs. I never gave it much thought when Ms. Potts explained it, but now I realize everyone does need to eat. How many times have you walked by a restaurant only to stop and then step in for a quick bite? I know I did little more than a year ago. I just never left.

My boss is Angela's son, Thomas Thurmon. I've heard Ms. Potts call him Junior. He grew up in the diner. Back then, mommas couldn't drop their babies off at a day care, afford an all-day sitter, or hire a live-in Au Pairs. And in Angela Thurmon's case, she was a single parent with two babies to tend to: the diner, and Junior. So, Junior spent his days playing in the diner. I imagine there could have been worse things.

All things considered, I think Junior must've had it pretty good growing up with his days spent at Angela's Diner. I can picture him in my head, running around and playing under the booths, his makeshift hideaways. Or maybe snaking through the stool posts at the counter, probably imagining them as steel pillars – a gateway to some mystical land. Maybe he had a toy car, or something, and with it, he made traveling mysteries and adventures. He could've used the sounds of the diner with busy trucks passing on highway overpasses, their heavy traffic sounds filling the diner and staying true to rush hour. A quick glance around the diner, and I laughed at the child-proofing that would have been called to question today.

Ms. Potts knew Angela Thurmon better than perhaps anyone. And there was never a shortage of stories. Angela had lost her husband at a young age to a horrible car accident involving a drunk taxi driver. Newspapers followed a big public outcry against the taxi company, which was one of the largest and richest in the city. Talk of scandal and cover-up ended with a handsome settlement paid to Angela and Junior. The settlement was enough that Angela never had to work again – she could have easily spent her days minding Junior and doing whatever else pleased her. Instead, she put all her money into the diner and into the land the diner was sitting on. She had straight up ownership of it and with only the monthly food bills, maintenance, employees, and utilities as the overhead – nothing else.

Ms. Potts happened to be one of her first employees. Clark followed a year or so after. Angela filled her days working to make the diner successful. No job was too big or too small. She worked the grill alongside Clark, waited tables, or cleaned the bathrooms when the need wasn't filled quickly.



enough for her taste. She worked all the jobs, even repaired the roof after spring winds opened it up like a tin can under hungry fingers.

When arthritis put a limp in her step, it slowed her some, but not enough to stop her. This was her place. As she grew older, the arthritis moved from her hips and legs, to her feet and hands. Soon, the simple jobs, the basic ones, were too much. A stool at the cash register became her last station. Most days, she'd greet folks and chat up a hello and goodbye, followed by a whispery *please come again*. But her diner out-lived Mrs. Angela Thurmon. She'd grown ill, and the arthritis aged her more quickly than she should have. And then there came one afternoon. The sun was setting, and Ms. Potts said she saw a tear in Angela's eye as she told Junior that she thought it was time for her to go home. Ms. Potts told me she often wondered if on that particular day, Angela knew it would be her last day at the diner.

She died less than a month later. Ms. Potts said that a little piece of Angela's Diner died the day they put Mrs. Thurmon in the ground. Junior was already grown, and now a well-respected lawyer in downtown Philadelphia. He cared and supported a family of his own. He brought them to his mother's diner from time to time, which always pleased Ms. Potts. He made sure Ms. Potts and Clark stayed on. He'd kept Angela's Diner. He'd kept all of it.

I'd met Mr. Thurmon sometime during my first month of work. An attractive older man, he wasn't at all anything like I pictured him. Often, I'd hear Ms. Potts and Clark make light of Junior and some of his antics growing up at Angela's. But the man I met didn't fit the image. I suppose this is true for most of us. The cousins and the younger siblings of friends we grow up with end up being completely different. The person they become is a mere shadow of the person you remember them to be. They're grown-up with adult lives and adult problems. That was Junior.

Mr. Thurmon's laugh is something, too – I think we'd all admit to enjoying it. Ms. Potts said it was Angela's laugh, as well. It's a very contagious laugh that almost always gets us all going when we hear it. When he'd get to talking about his time as a child in the diner and the games he'd play, he would smile and laugh, and maybe even glow a little; just enough for me to get a glimpse of the little boy Ms. Potts and Clark liked to talk about.

We never knew exactly when Mr. Thurmon planned to stop in. Fridays were payday. As waitresses, we earned an hourly wage, as did Clark, so there was something. Not much, but something. Other than Friday, I think his stopping in had more to do with being in the neighborhood, or a drop-in with the kids to see Ms. Potts.

On this particular visit, he didn't come with paychecks in hand, he wasn't looking to get a bite to eat, or to pick up the receipts and books for the week. I could smell his aftershave follow him as I walked passed me. He offered me a polite smile and a hello, and threw another smile and hello to Clark, who replied with a brief nod from behind the grill. Ms. Potts was already in the back, which was where they've stayed. Some of the time, he'd stand with one hand stroking his necktie, and other times he'd talk as Ms. Potts listened.

All kinds of thoughts were going through my head. The biggest was that they'd have to let me go. I'd overstayed my welcome. My time at Angela's might be over. My newfound family would have to say goodbye. Angela's could be busy at times. Almost crowded. But it wasn't consistent, at least not as often as I saw the first months of working here.

Just a block away from Angela's Diner, a fast-food restaurant was put up, nearly overnight. One day, a group of construction workers showed up, wearing green-yellow reflective vests, and white hard hats. With shovels and pick-axes in hand, they broke the sidewalk into pieces, digging up the ground, and making an awful noise that rattled the diner's front window. Within a week, it seemed there were already lights on the inside of what they'd built, with palm-sized round bulbs twinkling and running along the pitched red roof outside. The same types of lights blinked around a bright sign that stood in front of the freshly manicured landscaping. The sign spelled out a 'Grand Opening' welcome, and

some other nonsense I didn't read. I'd walked past the sign, stopped, and spun around to give it a once-over. My first thought was Angela's Diner. When the doors did open, I think a bit of our business left. A big bit, or, should I say, a bite!

I've walked past the fast-food place every day on my way to and from the diner. Their parking lot is always full, and enough bodies are lined up to keep me from seeing through the wall-to-wall glass windows. It is a busy crowd. A fast crowd. A crowd interested in getting in and getting out. There are days when it is full of a younger group of kids. On those days, I've seen teens wearing blue tweed jackets and gray blazers. They're the kids from the all-girls and all-boys school. A few of the faces, I recognized, and even remember serving a coffee or two. Once, I glimpsed Blonde and Red, sitting at a beige plastic booth, laughing it up with some boys while dipping fries into their chocolate and vanilla shakes.

"Hi, Gabby. Ms. Potts and Clark treating you okay?" Mr. Thurmon asked. I jumped when I heard his voice, startling the fast-food thoughts away. At some point, the conversation in the back of the diner broke, and, while Ms. Potts continued working an inventory check, Mr. Thurmon had poured himself some coffee and had taken a seat at the counter.

"Yes. Yes, thank you," I answered quickly, thinking my voice sounded nervous. I passed him the creamers and sugar, and asked, "And you?"

With half a smile, he nodded his head and then gave his mother's diner a glance, "Same... but the same is good, right?"

"Sure thing," I answered back, this time my words sounded stronger. Sipping his coffee, Mr. Thurmon began to say something, but then hesitated. Ms. Potts joined me at the counter, and Mr. Thurmon stood and took a step toward the booths and stared. Moving to the far corner, he knelt down on one knee, looked beneath the table, and began to laugh.

"Ya know," he started, his finger pointing under the table, "I used to fit under there. Amazing. This place used to look enormous to me." He chuckled as he stood, and then spun a seat on one of the counter's stools. Lifting his arms like a conductor of an orchestra, he announced, "A kingdom with shiny gates coming up from the ground, and Clark, our Knight, and Guardian of the Grill." His eyes were wide as he described a strange land he'd made up and played in as a boy.

"Junior. It's gonna be okay." Ms. Potts said, her voice shaky. She stepped toward Mr. Thurmon and placed a hand on his arm. "It's gonna be fine."

Mr. Thurmon turned to face us, his expression lost thirty years in that moment, and briefly, I saw a little boy's eyes, and a little boy's smile.

"Can you fix me some of your hot cocoa... with the little marshmallows? It's been years since I've had your hot cocoa," he begged with his hands brought together.

"Sure thing. Would be my pleasure," Ms. Potts answered, and led him back to the counter where he took to his seat.

"Thank you," he said, his smile broad and his eyes wandering around the diner. Clark and I passed a confused look. I liked Mr. Thurmon. I didn't like seeing him like this. In fact, it scared me. Ms. Potts' expression told me it scared her, too. He reminded me of someone on the verge, someone who'd been given news that was just too much for them to take in one sitting.

Whatever he'd come to talk to Ms. Potts about, it couldn't have been good news. Selfish relief settled in me as I realized that any news this big couldn't have been about letting me go. Surely letting a waitress go due to financial reason wouldn't spin up Mr. Thurmon's cuckoo clock. That meant the news could be about Angela's Diner, and that, too, wouldn't be good for anyone.

Ms. Potts hurried a cup of hot cocoa to the counter, and plunked three mini marshmallows into the small frothy pool floating on top. Steam circled above the cup, gesturing an invitation. My stomach growled, and my mouth watered. Ms. Potts held a proud smile. I think she rather enjoyed making

Junior a cup of hot cocoa. For the minute or so of work, it probably took her back the thirty years I  
seen disappear from his face.

When his cell phone rang, his smile broke, and he quickly blinked away his childhood world. By  
the second and third ring, I could once again see the Mr. Thurmon I knew. The little boy was gone. He  
answered his cell phone, and within a minute, he was talking in a lawyer tongue none of  
understood. He gave us a brief wave of his hand, and then left the diner – his cup of hot cocoa and  
marshmallows left untouched and alone on the counter.

The bell above the door rang an empty sound, and I couldn't wait to ask, "What was that all  
about?" But Ms. Potts didn't say a word. Not at first. Clark walked around the grill to the front to join  
me. Before answering, Ms. Potts took Mr. Thurmon's seat, picked up his hot cocoa, and drank down  
one of the mini-marshmallows.

"He's scared," Ms. Potts answered, her voice sounding unsteady.

"Ma'am, sc-scared of what?" Clark asked.

"My boy got himself a double today."

Embarrassed. I asked, "A double?"

"Double-bad. Junior hit twice with news nobody likes – ain't even six o'clock yet."

"Wh-what wrong with Junior, m-ma'am?"

"It's the arthritis, the bad one: the one that crippled his momma. The one that took her early," Ms.  
Potts answered, sipped the cocoa, and then whispered, "Took her too early. And now he got it. Gonna  
be a cripple, couple years."

From the stories Ms. Potts told, I could imagine the fear Mr. Thurmon must have been feeling.  
I felt bad for him, and thought it might have been why he came here today. He wanted to grab a taste  
of his days as a little boy, when his momma was healthy and they were happy. Ms. Potts said he got  
a double. What was the other news? I waited to see if Clark would ask, but he didn't.

"And the other news?"

Ms. Potts put her cocoa down and fixed her glasses, pushing them up with the tip of a finger. She  
looked to me first, and then to Clark, where she left her eyes, as she answered.

"Angela's is having some money issues. Coming in shorter than we were last year. With the news  
about his health, he's considering sellin' the restaurant."

"Is it the fast-food place?" I asked. I heard Clark sigh and watched as he rested heavily against the  
wall. Ms. Potts stood up, her eyes still on Clark. She wiped at the counter. I could tell she was upset.  
She wiped the counter again and then stopped.

"Clark, you know what that mean?"

"Y-yes ma'am. I know." he replied and went back to the grill. Clark hung his head low, and his  
step was slow, as though the weight of the world suddenly found his shoulders. I was missing  
something. Selling Angela's Diner might just mean new owners. But I didn't think it was just the  
money. There was something else.

"We leaning, so there must be some cleaning," Ms. Potts said, and forced a smile. As I took to  
helping wipe the counter, Ms. Potts stopped, then sat back down to finish her cocoa. The same  
troublesome weight that settled on Clark's shoulders was visible in Ms. Potts' eyes.

Most weeks, the days at Angela's Diner tend to run together. While the faces of those coming and going may change, the looks in their eyes stay the same. And, if I'm not paying attention, the Mondays and Tuesdays just melt into Wednesdays and Thursdays. Maybe that is why some days stand out more than others. Maybe that is why some of the stories we hear at the diner stay with us for days and sometimes longer. Friday is the exception. And, with money in their pockets, folks tend to shake off the last four days.

I work every day of the week, and sometimes on Saturdays. But I do have Sunday to call my own. After all, I have a room to tend to, and an agreement with Ms. Potts that I'd keep it respectable, somewhat, anyway. She is an easy enough landlord, and, I suppose, I am an easy enough tenant. Now you'd think, with the two of us living under the same roof so to speak, that we'd see quite a lot of each other. But the truth is that I don't think I've ever crossed paths with Ms. Potts outside of the diner, except for when she handed me the keys to my new place. My heart skips a little each time I think about the sound of the keys as she placed them in my hand. I'd never had a place to call my own before – not one that was just mine.

Like I said, most days tend to run together. And then there are the days that stay with us when we go home. Some of them stay with us long after that. And others... they can stay with us forever. I can count on one hand the number of *forever* days. Don't even need all five fingers, just a few. Yes, a lasting impression.

The memorable days are the ones that seem to randomly play back in your head. No reminders or reasoning – it could be as simple as watering a house plant, like my Felix. Today was one of those days. I saw the faces and heard the conversations in my mind, and my poor Felix ended up with a little more water than he needed. I filled and spilled over the lip of the planter with some of his water and dirt running down onto the window sill. I'm sure Felix will survive.

I met an older woman today. Sandra – she said her name was – had stopped into the diner for some coffee to help pick her up during a particularly long drive. The drive was a fair distance considering where she came from, and where she was going. A heavy smell of perfume carried with her as she took a seat across from me at the counter. As she settled, she thumped her purse onto the counter, and fished out a cell phone. There was a classiness in the way she dressed and carried herself, the kind you admire from afar. Maybe she ran the PTA, or had a seat on a council for her local community. Or maybe she dabbled in town politics, giving the up-and-coming politicians a run on their candidacy budgets.

A mature woman, I watched as she typed out a text message. Her painted nails sounded off a rattling of clicks and clacks as she pressed each of the tiny keys. She kept just a few rings on. There was her wedding band, and an engagement ring, and what looked to be an anniversary ring. And then I saw an odd silver ring that seemed out of place next to all the gold. If chance would have it, I thought I might ask her about the ring.

Sandra wore a shorter hair style than most women her age, for convenience perhaps, or maybe it worked better for her small, round face. Brown hair with sandy highlights, she cradled one side with her palm, and then the other, pushing back any strays that fell out of place. Grays were hidden away but had grown out some. Maybe she'd missed a hair appointment, although she didn't strike me as the type that would miss one.

Diner instinct had my hands putting a coffee mug in front of her. Holding the pot of coffee up, I asked if she'd like a cup. I told her it was fresh, brewed just a few minutes ago. She returned a polite enough smile, and nodded yes. It didn't take long before I could see she was distracted. Her mind was

someplace else.

~~“Thank you, dear. This is exactly what I came in for,” she said in a voice that was soft, but clear.~~

Having noticed the wedding ring, I grabbed another cup for her husband. But, as I placed it down in front of the seat next to her, Sandra raised her hand and waved it away.

“My husband won’t be joining me,” she started to say, and then looked toward the front of the diner. “We parked up the street, and he made it half a block on our walk here. When he saw the bar across the way... well, I’ll have the coffee, but he’s decided to have something a little more spirited,” she continued.

She turned back to me, her eyes empty, and with hushed words, she said the most curious thing. “He won’t finish till he drowns it.” I don’t think she intended for me to hear what she said, and so she tried to smile past the comment with a short apology,

“Excuse me,” she began, “just babbling.”

“Not at all. So, are you and your husband passing through?”

“We’re on our way to Delaware – started out earlier today from Connecticut a few hours back. We live up there half the year.”

“Family? You have family in Delaware?”

Sandra stopped and considered the question. A smile bloomed on her face, and she answered. “We’re going to pick up our boy. He’s been overseas in Afghanistan the last eighteen months. Tom’s that’s my son – he’s a hero.”

I hated to admit it, but my knowledge of war and politics were vague at best. On occasion, Clara liked to fill me in on the details. But most of the time when I’d try to listen, I would lose interest in what he was telling me. Over the last year, I did get to know where I was, and who I was living with. Angela’s Diner is in Philadelphia, and Philadelphia had a lot of its own going off to war. From what Ms. Potts had told me, quite a few of the young men were from our small neighborhood. Some came back. Some didn’t. And a lot of them wished they hadn’t gone over at all. This was the first mention of a hero, though.

The bell above the door rang, and a chill washed in far enough to reach me. Goose flesh danced over my arms as I tried to hug it away. The diner was nearly empty so I made use of the unfilled cup and poured myself some of the hot coffee.

“A hero?” I asked.

“A hero,” she boasted proudly.

“That really is something – you and your husband must be so proud.”

Raising her eyes past me, Sandra’s smile grew. She closed her eyes, put her hands over her heart, and mouthed his name. She finished her coffee and motioned for more before continuing.

“Oh, we are. Odd thing is, growing up, Tom really wasn’t into the army thing, or cops and robbers, or any of that. I mean, he played the same video games, and maybe some play wars with the neighborhood boys. Other than that, he never showed an interest in the military.” Sandra’s eyes moved to her hands, and her eyebrows lifted slightly. “My son sided more with the creative – like this ring I made for me,” she said, lifting her hand to show the silver band I’d wondered about.

“That is pretty – I was admiring it earlier,” I commented. Sandra held the ring a second longer, but then her eyes narrowed, “It was his father. He watched the news all the time, and especially watched what was going on over there. You know, after 9/11. He was obsessed with it. I guess we all were, a little.”

“I was just a kid back then. I remember seeing it at our school when it happened, and I remember our school letting us go home just before the second tower fell.”

Sandra nodded her head yes, and said, “Tom’s about your age. His school let out early, too. I suppose they all did when the towers were hit.”

“So, is your husband in the military?”

~~Sandra hinted a smile and waved a dismissive hand, “No, bad plumbing, is all. He wanted~~ enlist, and even tried once. A year before we started dating, he’d lost a kidney to cancer. *Easier cancer to beat*, he likes to say. Things might be different now, but back then, you had to have both kidneys to enlist. Just having one wasn’t good enough. I think they’d consider you a liability. Never really understood the reasoning. I mean, you only have one heart and one brain, right? So, his heart was always in it, and he wanted to, but he couldn’t enlist.”

“I can imagine how thrilled your husband must be for your son. I mean, being a hero, and all.” At once, Sandra’s expression went cold and hard. She gave her cell phone a quick lift to study the small screen.

“Yes. He is proud and thrilled – or he *was*,” she answered, her voice sounded sterile and rehearsed. She dropped her cell phone back to the counter and looked up at me. “Sometimes I think maybe my son wouldn’t have joined the army if his father hadn’t talked about what was going on over there so damn much,” she answered, her voice sounding callous. But then she shook her head and pushed a grin.

Sandra picked her purse up and raced through the contents. I thought she might be hunting down a photo of her son: the really nice military kind that people like to show off. Instead, she pulled out a letter. It was made up of formal stationery, and had an embossed emblem on the face of the envelope. Definitely military. Her eyes widened, and her face lit up as she asked,

“Can I tell you a story? Can I tell you how my son became a hero?”

At once, I was excited. The diner was slow, and getting a story was a real treat. “I’d love to hear it. Thank you,” I told her, as she embraced the letter.

“This is just one of a dozen letters I’ve received from the men and women in his unit,” she started, and then, for the next few minutes, Sandra told me how her son became a hero.

He was on patrol with his unit a few miles from their post, when they came upon a family standing in the middle of the road. A young woman was crying, and her husband frantically waved his arms at Tom’s unit, begging for them to stop. They stopped, and one of the men stepped out to ask what had happened. The woman was beside herself; anguish took her words – all she could do was flail her arms and cry. The woman’s husband was grateful Tom and his unit had stopped. He pointed out to the field next to the road where, they saw two kids playing. The soldiers quickly learned that the man and woman in the road were the parents of the two children. The mother cried out the same words over and over, and, finally, one of the men in the unit understood what she was saying. “Minefield,” he barked loud enough for everyone to hear. By now, Tom’s unit had filed out of their vehicles and lined up along the edge of the road. All of the soldiers stepped back from the minefield. One soldier had already trekked a handful of steps toward the children. The soldiers in the unit yelled for him to stop and then talked him through repeating his steps, only backwards, until he was safely on the road.

Minefields are scattered across the Afghanistan provinces, Sandra told me. Most of them are blocked off with signs and makeshift fencing. Just about all of them are on a schedule to be demined. The minefield the kids wandered into was on the list, and was supposed to have been blocked off with fencing, but that never happened. Everyone in the area knew about it: the families, their kids. Everyone, except a set of curious twins. A boy and a girl, maybe five years old; old enough to walk and run, and young enough to not know any better.

Tom and his unit had no demining tools. A special group was usually called in to handle the clearing of a few mines, let alone an entire field. Personnel from the unit tried to explain this to the family – instead, the family continued their begging and pleading for help. They assumed that Tom

and the others, given their military gear, could navigate the mines and save their babies.

~~The mother's crying slowed. The reports from the unit stated that she began to yell at her husband, hollering that he should be brave, that he should go get their babies. The father scolded her and his wife's words were considered disrespectful. Or maybe the father of the twins was ashamed because he was afraid. The mother and father started to argue and yell. And maybe it was this disconcerting activity between the parents that caused what happened next.~~

The little boy stood up in the field and pointed to his mother and father. He stood up and began to say something in Afghani. His words were young, and new, and far too soft for anyone to hear from that distance. The little boy then pulled his sister up, and the two of them stood in the middle of the minefield, their attentions drawn in by their parents. They raised their voices and yelled to the parents, as children often do. They yelled to their mother and father, who continued to argue with each other. Tom was the first to see the twins lean into a step. It was a baby step, but it was a step, and there was no way to know where the land mines were buried. Tom ran to the mother and father, and instructed them to tell the twins to sit down and not move. But Tom's Afghani was new, too, and the parents were confused by his instructions.

By the time the twins took a second step, the other men and women in the unit saw the kids on the move, as well. They waved their arms up and down, motioning for the children to sit down. The twins must have thought it was a funny sight, all the helmeted soldiers in tan and brown fatigues, waving them from the road. The children didn't sit down, they waved back. Laughing, they took another step.

"Sit down, sit down!" everyone began screaming. They continued waving their arms in the air. Tom raced through his Afghani/English translation book, trying to find the words. The twins weren't looking at their parents anymore. They were laughing at the site of the figures hopping up and down along the edge of the road. One of the reports stated that the little boy and girl started to jump up and down in a mimic, playing along with what they saw. When they grew tired of jumping, they stopped and then took another step.

"*Ksséte, ksséte, ksséte,*" Tom yelled in Afghani to the children. He'd found the translation for *down*, and yelled it to the twins. The other men and women with Tom's unit did the same. The mother and father stopped their arguing. Their color had paled, and their faces grew sullen and scared. The little girl called out to her mother, her fingers stretched outward, gripping handfuls of air. And then they took another step.

The chanting stopped. Everyone sucked in a breath and waited. Nothing happened, and then the parents started yelling alongside the soldiers. They called out "*Ksséte, ksséte, ksséte,*" in a correct pronunciation. And this time, the children heard them. The little boy argued that he didn't want to sit down, and that he wanted to come over to see the soldiers in their helmets and uniforms. He wanted to see if they had treats for them. His father directed him to stay. But the little boy shook his head, and with his sister's hand in his, they took another step. A gust of wind pushed sand and dirt into the air. The winds stirred up a heavy cloud, hiding the twins from Tom's unit like a secret.

The men and women in Tom's unit waited: some raised their hands in front of their eyes, expecting the worst to happen. When the winds and dirt settled, and when nothing happened, they joined in with the father's demands. They stopped waving their arms and told the twins "down". A few in the unit radioed back to the base, seeking instructions. Any demining help would be hours past their need, which was immediate. The little girl jumped up and down, calling out to her mother. She pulled on her brother's arm, and they took another step. And then a second. And a third.

The unit's report stated that Sandra's son never hesitated. Tom didn't request permission, or wait to see if a mine exploded under the feet of the children. He just ran. He was half way to the little boy and girl before anyone realized what he was doing. Tom didn't try to jump to different points in the field – he didn't watch the ground where his feet landed. He just ran.

His entire unit began screaming at him to get off the minefield. Orders were shouted, calling for him to ~~discontinue and rejoin the unit on the road~~. But Tom heard none of it. He'd reached the twins, scooped up the boy like a football, and grabbed the little girl by her arm. When he stopped and turned back to face the road, he stood and searched the field of dirt for footprints.

"What are you doing?" Someone screamed out to him. They all knew what he was doing. If he hadn't run out to them, if he hadn't done something, then the twins almost certainly would have been killed. Tom's unit continued to yell and scream. They instructed him to find his steps and use them. Find his boot tracks, and follow them back out to the road.

The only sounds coming from the mother and father were prayers in whispered monotone words strung together in long breaths. They were kneeling on the ground, their hands brought together in front of them, pleading that Tom's tracks would be shown to him as clear as he could see the children. Tom paced his steps, and worked his way back to the road. At some point, the little girl began to slip from his hand. Tom tried to hoist her into his arms as he hurried himself, but her body fell from his fingers, and she tumbled hard to the ground. She cried and yelled something in Afghan at him. He tried to stop, but he couldn't. Momentum had his feet moving to the next boot track, and then another boot track, and then he was back on the road, dropping the boy and turning around. And the winds came again. The winds shouted louder this time, raising the dust and blinding everyone. More clouds of dirt and sand circled around the vehicles, the soldiers, and everything else, hiding the little girl whose cries were muffled by the sounds beating sands.

Tom was back to the girl a minute later – guided by her voice yelling to her mother, he ran and scooped her up in a tight embrace. The boot tracks he'd followed were gone, stolen by the wind. Reports state that Tom pulled the girl up in a hug, and simply raced for the road. He'd saved the twins.

Sandra's words were mesmerizing. I felt my heart racing, and it wasn't just the excitement of it, it was the pride. I could hear it in her voice. Amazing.

"You'll have to stop back in during your drive home – I'd love to meet your hero," I exclaimed almost demanded, and beamed with a smile.

When the bell over the door rang, another chilly breeze fell inside the diner, as a balding man entered. His face was tired, his cheeks sunken. Dark gray pouches carried his eyes, which were bloodshot and wet. He lifted his face just enough to see me and Sandra. Sandra turned, their eyes connected and he gave a nod and walked toward us. When he reached the counter, he sat down. Tossing his keys to drop on the counter in front of him, he again lifted his chin just long enough to look at me.

"Coffee," he said in a voice that was gruff and broken. The smell of whiskey carried with him. I wrinkled my nose to the smell of it when he spoke.

"Sure thing," I answered, and poured the coffee. After a taste, he stood and told Sandra he was going to the restroom, and that he'd be back in a few minutes. He told her that they should get back on the road, that they had some hours left in their drive to Delaware. When he walked toward the restroom, I wanted to ask Sandra if he was okay. He didn't look as though he'd had one too many at the Irish pub down the street, but he didn't seem right. There was something more.

"That's my husband," she started to say. Picking up her purse, she fumbled through the contents and pulled out a tube of lip-balm. I thought she was going to cry as she squeezed some on her finger and rubbed it across her lips. Her expression changed for a moment, and she cupped her mouth and closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I don't mean to intrude... but is everything okay?"

Sandra opened her eyes, put a hand on mine, and blinked away a tear.

"My son is a hero. We're going to Delaware to pick him up today," she proclaimed. When she said



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