

## Garbage Mouth

That time I waited tables at the diner on 17<sup>th</sup> Street I made a habit of eating customers' leftovers. I didn't have a lot of money for food in those days. Yes, I spent too much on drugs, but even so, why should something like three perfectly good crispy and golden chicken fingers go into the trash? Blow off the clingy bits of shredded lettuce and have a snack.

Totally against policy; health-code violation we were told. The manager was really strict about it. He took his job seriously the way only someone in a dead-end job could and prowled around for people like me. He called us garbage mouthers.

And so there I was mid-chew, a greasy onion ring pinched in greedy fingers, hidden I thought, behind the dishwasher, when the manager appeared out of the steam like a surprise belch.

"Are you garbage mouthing?"

Being polite I swallowed before answering. "It seemed a crime to waste."

"You're fired."

"Over an onion ring?"

"This is the third time. You're fired."

Third time catching me I wanted to say. Instead I yelled, "The food sucks anyway. I'm so out of here."

"You have ketchup." He wiped his lip where I should mine.

Which I didn't. I hoped people would think it was blood. I kicked through the service door into the alley, tore off my apron, and tossed it into a trash bin. On the sidewalk I leaned into my stride and pounded home.

The freezer held a pint of pistachio ice cream which belonged to my roommate Donnie and which I hated. I preferred chocolate. I used a fork; drank the slurry melt. Next I choked down the last two yeasty slices from an expired bag of Wonder Bread.

Donnie caught me sticky-fingered: “You ate my ice cream.”

“I had to. I was starving.”

“Buy your ass some groceries then.”

I turned my pockets out to demonstrate my destitute state. A nickel plunked to the floor. I’d no idea it was there, but it did kind of emphasize my point.

“Cute,” Donnie said.

“They fired me.”

“There’s rent. You owe me five bucks for pizza. Dude, get it together.”

“It was so stupid. The manager caught me eating leftovers.”

“That’s disgusting,” Donnie said.

And I was still hungry. I needed a job but what I wanted was lunch. I went to Safeway and stole a can of Hormel turkey chili. At Whole Foods I grabbed napkins and a plastic spoon from the prepared-foods counter. Before I hit the exit a staff member pushed in front of me. “All right, man. What are you hiding?” His nametag read Suleimayn and his accent was so beautiful I wished I could bottle it. He pulled up my shirt and grabbed the can hidden in my caved-in tummy.

“I brought it with me,” I said. “You guys don’t sell that.”

He stared at the label a lot longer than it took to read. He knew I was right, but he probably also knew I’d stolen it. He seemed unsure what to do. I was caught but in the wrong place by the wrong person. It was just one of those things.

“Get out of here.”

Dupont Circle: I plopped down in the shade of a tree and took in the crowd. Sitting on a bench near the fountain was Brian. I knew him from around, but mostly he talked to me because I fed him Camels in between sets of his strip shows at Wet. He was shirtless, his face cast backwards at the sun, and shorts pulled down past his hips with the zipper butterflyed open. He was tanning himself. I remembered he’d said a little browning made his abs stand out underneath the lights.

The can was a pop-top. Perfect for campers, shoplifters, and castaways. I watched Brian while spooning up wedges of cold, gelatinous chili. I watched him scratch his chin. I watched him adjust his shoulders against the bench. I watched a man lean over as if smelling him and say something, his lips moving. I watched Brian ignore him. I watched Brian adjust his crotch.

I sucked the spoon clean and palmed my chin. Then I snuck up on Brian and kissed him. His eyes opened in shock and that’s when I saw he wasn’t Brian at all.

“Oh, my god,” I said. “I thought you were someone else.”

“The fuck?” The man stood. His collar bones rose to the level of my eyes. Glazed with sweat, they were nice collar bones. And even though this stranger’s boiling, angry face let me know he was going to pummel me like a piece of raw meat, all I wanted was to lick at their salty tang.

He hooked an uppercut into my gut. I sank to my knees; concrete grit chewed into my palms.

“Man, you should brush your teeth,” he said.

His high tops disappeared and I managed to crawl over to the bushes before yacking into the tulips. I lay on my back for a spell, relishing the simple joy of functioning lungs, and

ignoring the rancid taste in my mouth. Once the threat of any further heaves passed I got to shaky legs and loped in the direction of home.

A well-trodden path took me past the diner where I'd worked only hours ago. I paused to look in the windows. Waiters darted here and there. The manager scurried through the aisles, a cheese-less rat. I laughed at the poor dopes.

I swiped a sugar packet off a patio table, popped it into my mouth and then walked on. Soon, saliva and paper and sugar were all muddled together and I rolled the mass back and forth across my tongue like a candy. Such sweet relief. A trot entered my steps. What fool had called sugar empty calories? I bunched the wad between teeth and cheek and sucked at it for blocks before swallowing it down.