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Welcome to Joe's

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Welcome to Joe's

"Are you going to stare at the truck all day or actually help?" my boss, Jane, snapped as she struggled by me with a pouch of queso flung over her shoulder.

"Sorry," I said quickly, reaching down to grab hold of the black beans. "I was just deciding what to bring up next."

"Could you decide a little faster next time?"

Every Monday I was in charge of bringing the truck shipment up from the loading dock to our back stockroom at Joe's Taco Shack. Then I would play Tetris to fit all the oversized containers in our walk-in refrigerator.

The black beans came in clear containers that I had to use two hands to carry. I stared down at the watery tub, where the beans stuck to the plastic sides and little black specks floated in the liquid. I wasn't even sure they should be considered beans. They were more like pellets that Joe's liked to pass off as something edible.

I ground my teeth as I followed Jane's bleached blonde ponytail upstairs. She hated me. From the moment I showed up for my first day of work two years ago, all Jane could manage out of her mouth was criticism.

It wasn't just her personality, because my coworkers could do no wrong.

Oh Jake, you forgot what a Homewrecker is? It's okay, that's a tricky one.

But the moment I burned a quesadilla during my second week, I became, for her, the reason that people thought fast food workers were incompetent.

I couldn't prove it, but I always assumed Jane held a grudge because I had a bachelor's degree in communication. She had been working at Joe's since she was a teenager and had climbed her way to the head management position. She'd been a manager for over ten years now and she was proud of it. She thought all of higher education was corrupt, and would tell anyone who'd listen that people shouldn't waste their money just to get a piece of paper they could frame and hang on the wall. Sometimes I thought she might be right.

Even with a degree, I was working here the same as she was. But I tried not to think like that because it depressed me. In their promotional materials, colleges always promise that an impressive percentage of their graduates get hired within the first year. They never mention the people like me who are working at minimum wage jobs, thousands of dollars in debt, nine months after graduation.

I watched as Jane piled the queso bag on top of the others in the corner. She wiped the sweat from her hairline where her brown roots were starting to show through. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she hated me because she was a middle-aged woman who still couldn't figure out how to dye her hair properly.

"Hey, Jane, I'm supposed to go on break at one. Do you think you can finish the truck by yourself?" I gave the bean container a shove. I was trying to squeeze it in between two basins of guacamole. There was clearly not enough space, but I pushed, determined to make it work so that I didn't have to walk and get the ladder from the closet to reach the top shelf. I swung my hip against the side of the container with force. The corner hit the lip of the shelf, causing the container to tumble out of my hands towards the cement floor.

Shit. I felt like I was in slow motion as I automatically stretched out my hand to try to catch the falling container. I watched my hand move under it, knowing it was a bad idea but lacking control to stop it. The ridged cap hit my palm and bent my wrist back past a ninety-degree angle. Pain wound around my spine as I cried out and reached down to grasp my wrist. The container hit the ground at the same moment I lost my balance on the slick floor. The bean juice flooded out as the cap got thrown across the room, and I landed in the puddle.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked.

I rolled sideways, still clutching my wrist in pain. I didn't notice that my hair was soaking up the grey juice like a sponge, or that black beans covered my white work shoes. Why did the black bean containers have to be so damn heavy?

"Are you okay?" Jane repeated, a little more forcefully this time.

I looked up and found Jane staring down at me with a slight worried expression on her face. She was probably concerned they would have to pay me workers' compensation. I realized how pathetic I must have looked, sitting in a pile of black beans on the floor of the walk-in fridge. I surveyed my wrist. It didn't look broken, but the creases in my skin were a fiery red. I moved my wrist cautiously. It hurt if I bent it past a small range of motion, but it was probably only sprained.

"I'm fine," I said when I managed to sit up.

Jane looked at me with her eyebrows raised. I grabbed my wrist self-consciously and fought back a grimace as pain shot up to my elbow. Jane watched

me for a second longer, then let her gaze fall to the beans scattered across the floor.

“That was fifty dollars worth of black beans,” she said quietly, shaking her head.

I bit my lip and swallowed a retort that maybe if the fridge was better organized, I would have been able to fit all the containers easily without spilling them. I knew the time and place to pick a fight with Jane, and sitting in a pile of black beans that I had just spilled wasn't it.

“Clean this up and finish the truck. Then you can take your break.”

I nodded meekly and Jane left the fridge without another word. I flicked a black bean off my knee. I hated that a dumpy manager at Joe's thought I was incompetent. I'd been in the honors program in college and graduated with a 3.8 GPA. How had this become my life? I hobbled out of the fridge and over to the broom closet. The mop and bucket were behind the ladder near the back corner. I slammed the ladder out of the way with unneeded force. It was the ladder's fault this had happened. If it hadn't been so far away, I wouldn't have had to shove the container in between those two bins of guacamole.

The mess took me forty minutes to clean up. The black beans had flown everywhere and refused to be picked up by the twisted threads of the mop. I had to bend down and pinch them off the ground individually, then throw them into the bucket. My college friends would puncture a lung from laughter if they could see me now, picking black beans off the floor of Joe's.

“Isn't Alex supposed to be here?” I asked Jane after I put away the mop.

Jane looked up from her paperwork. She had a deep scowl on her face that caused the skin around her eyes to scrunch into crow's feet. I noticed those the first time I met Jane, except I had incorrectly assumed that she got them from laughing too much, and figured she had to be a happy boss.

“I was wondering if he could finish the truck,” I said when she didn't respond. “My wrist is sore from falling and I don't think I can carry the rest of the stuff upstairs. I could work the register for him, though.”

Jane looked down at her paperwork. “It's just Marisa on the floor today. We can't afford to have you being the only one making the food, so you'll have to make it work.”

I ignored the fact that she had just insulted my ability to put together tacos. “Where's Alex?”

“He called in this morning to quit. Didn't even give two weeks' notice.”

My heart felt as if it had been pinched between the slits of my rib cage. “What? Why?”

Alex was the one good thing about this job. Jane seemed to despise him as much as she hated me, so I always felt like I had someone to complain to. He was only a year or two older than me, and had graduated from Kendall Culinary College. He had dreams of becoming a head chef and hated work-

ing at Joe's as much as I did. When we got bored, we would race each other to see who could make a taco the fastest, or bet on how long we could disappear to the bathroom without Jane noticing. I honestly can't say I blamed him for not taking the job seriously. He knew how to make *crème brûlée* and was stuck putting together burritos at a semi-fast-food joint.

"He got a job at Bonefish Grill as the junior chef."

"Of course he did," I muttered without thinking.

Jane looked at me, her face scrunched slightly in confusion. I ignored her. I thought Alex and I were supposed to be friends. I shook my head slightly, trying to shake away the hurt that Alex had told Jane about the job before me. Jane opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but then shook her head and turned her attention away. She started typing on her computer, her fingers tapping the keys furiously. I watched her fingers blur in motion for a second. It's not that I wasn't happy for Alex. I had tasted his cooking; he deserved to be a chef. I just didn't like the feeling of being left behind.

"I'm taking my break now." A sliver of bean juice dripped down my forehead from my hair and I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

Jane looked surprised at my statement. She stared at me for a second and I was taken aback by her expression. I had expected a fight, but Jane wasn't wearing her normal scowl. I examined her face trying to place what was different. Her features seemed softer somehow, her mouth less taut, and her eyes weren't squinting. I felt my heartbeat catch in my throat as I realized Jane felt sorry for me.

Jane nodded slowly. "Okay," she said. "Have a nice break."

I walked out of her office without a word, feeling worse than when I had been sitting in a puddle of black beans. The break room had blank white walls with a strip of red around the top towards the ceiling. I thought that was an attempt to make the room look Mexican. Jane hadn't done much to decorate here other than throw a sombrero on top of the fridge. It was the same sombrero she made us wear when she was on a power trip, although she insisted it was fun for the customers. My locker was in the back corner of the room, past the table holding the microwave and a pile of plastic forks. I tried to open the locker with my left hand, since my right wrist was still throbbing, but the door was stuck on the paystubs I had neglected to empty out of my locker for weeks now. The door wouldn't budge and I gave up, slumping down into a chair. I wasn't hungry for ramen again anyways.

Even with the door closed, Marisa's squeaky voice yelling, "Welcome to Joe's!" crept through the slit in the door whenever someone came into the restaurant. I squeezed my ears tightly, trying to block out the phrase, and thought about how much I disliked each and every one of those words.

“Welcome to Joe’s!” Who came up with that idea? Why did they think people would like being shouted at as they entered a restaurant? The customers were just hungry and wanted food.

My phone vibrated on the table and I looked down at the screen to see it was my mother calling. I groaned. I pressed the silence button quickly and a pain shot through my wrist at the sudden movement. I cradled my wrist in my lap with my other hand; I didn’t have the patience to deal with her right now. I loved my mother, but she had a tendency to trap me on the phone with pointless chatter for at least forty-five minutes when she called. I stared up at the red stripe, not really seeing it. I was wasting my life in this godforsaken place. This wasn’t what college had prepared me for. I was twenty-three years old. I was supposed to be an adult by now, not living paycheck to paycheck and eating free Joe’s I snuck home for dinner because I couldn’t afford anything else. I should be a PR representative by now, making a name for myself. Instead I was working for an hourly wage. My phone vibrated again and I looked down at the screen. Damn it.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Becky, honey, I called you three times yesterday and you never returned my calls.” My mother’s shrill voice echoed through the speakers.

“I know, I’m sorry. What’s up?” I asked.

“It’s Aunt Linda and Uncle Jon’s fiftieth anniversary next weekend and it’s at Valley Oak Inn, so Linda needs to know if you’re coming. I told her you probably would be there, but you know Linda. She needs to know for sure.”

I rolled my eyes. My mother had never liked my dad’s sister. Aunt Linda liked to lead an extravagant lifestyle, even though she worked as a secretary at a high school, and it drove my mom crazy. Linda and Jon hosted Christmas Eve dinner at their house every year and sent out fancy invitations with RSVPs on them. My dad had to write and mail the RSVP back because my mom refused to, claiming normal families use the phone.

“Yeah, tell Aunt Linda I’ll be there,” I replied. There was no reason not to go: free food, and watching my mom interact with Aunt Linda was always fun. Plus, I knew my mom would throw a fit if I said no.

“It’s next Saturday at seven, so you can come home first and we’ll drive over together. Linda wants all of us to wear cocktail dresses. Honestly, I don’t know who she thinks her family is, because I don’t know one Taylor who owns a cocktail dress other than Linda—”

“Listen, I’ve gotta go, Mom,” I interrupted her. Her voice was starting to give me a headache.

“Is everything alright, Becky?” she asked, completely ignoring my attempt to get off the phone. “You sound tired.”

I paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to answer that. I considered telling her how horrible my day had been, that I hurt my wrist and that Jane made me pick up a whole tub of black beans off the floor.

I settled for telling her the bare minimum: "It's just been a rough day at work."

I glanced up as one of my coworkers, Angela, walked into the room. She smiled and waved enthusiastically at me. Angela just started last week, and I had yet to see her without a smile plastered across her face. I gave her a small smile back. She was a sweet girl, even if she was too happy.

"You're always complaining about it there, honey. Why don't you look for a better job?" my mom asked.

I closed my eyes and let the silence between us be my answer. I knew she was just trying to look out for me, but I was aware of the limitations of my current situation without her reminding me.

"You can't let those interviews haunt you forever," she said.

"I don't want to talk about it. I've told you," I snapped. She always had to bring up the interviews. Always. I grabbed a fist full of my bangs and twisted them around my fingers until my scalp was stretched out tightly. It's in the past, I reminded myself. In. The. Past. I took a deep breath and tried to force the frustration back down into the pit of my stomach where I had buried it.

I was newly graduated when I had gone to my first interview. I had barely been out two months and I hadn't even received my diploma in the mail yet. I walked into the office with a confident smile and my public relations portfolio tucked into the briefcase my parents had bought me for graduation. I had been to all the career workshops at school and knew confidence was key. If I thought I was going to get the job, so would the interviewers. I shook their hands, firm and quick, as I'd be instructed.

The interview went well, or so I thought. The interviewer was an alumnus of Ohio State as well, so we reminisced about home football games for at least twenty minutes. I knew how important it was to network, and I thought we really made a connection. I left more confident than when I had walked in, shaking his hand and nodding with a smile when he told me they'd give me a call. For the next two weeks, I carried my phone around with me religiously. I even brought it into the bathroom. But once two weeks had passed, I took matters into my own hands and called them. The secretary who picked up had a ring to her voice that reminded me of a bell. She told me a decision had not been reached yet and I would receive a call when it did. I hung up, satisfied, but another week passed and I still didn't get a call. I called the bell secretary back, except this time when she answered my question her voice resembled a gong more than a bell.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Becky, but that position has been filled," the secretary said, pity seeping through the microphone of my cell.

I hung up, irritated that a secretary felt the need to have pity for me. I shrugged it off; I would just have to apply for another job. It was okay.

For the next few months, I interviewed for at least a job a week. Sometimes I would get a second interview, but ultimately they always ended in rejection. Every time I heard that dreaded phrase—"the position has been filled"—I wanted to bang my head against a wall in frustration. I tried to stay optimistic, but I felt like I was in a boxing match and the job market was destroying me, one punch at a time. After three months, I was finally defeated. I walked out of my last interview frustrated to the verge of tears. I just knew they'd choose someone else. I managed to hold in my tears until I got to the car. I called my mom, sobbing, barely able to see the steering wheel in front of me, much less drive.

"I'm never going to get a job, Mom," I managed between sobs.

She tried to soothe me, but I was inconsolable. I drove home and curled up on my bed. It's been five months since then, and I hadn't applied for a job since.

On the phone now, my mom was oblivious to my distraction and still talking. I concentrated on the rapid rate of her words to block out the meaning. I didn't think she was even breathing. "Just because you didn't get those other jobs doesn't mean you never will—"

"Actually, I got a job." It was word vomit. My mouth sagged open as I tried to comprehend what I had just done.

"You did?"

There was no taking it back now. I swallowed the pool of acid that had collected at the base of my throat.

"Yup." I tried to steady my vision by concentrating on the small burn mark on the corner of the tablecloth.

"Oh, honey, that's great!" I heard my mom jumping up and down, her feet pounding out a fast rhythm as they hit our squeaky kitchen floorboards. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"It's not official yet. They have to do a background check first, but I pretty much got it." The lie rolled off my tongue effortlessly. It was the fantasy I had been telling myself for the last five months. In those moments at night before I really fell asleep, I would let my subconscious drift into a world where I got that phone call telling me that I was, at last, a true professional, that they wanted me to be a part of their team. That I was, in fact, good enough.

"I'm so excited for you!" I almost couldn't stand the level of shrill my mother's voice had become. "What's the job?"

"A PR firm based in the city. They're a startup company." I needed to stop. I wasn't in my fantasy; this was real life. "I've got to go, Mom. My break is over."

“Okay, but you should come over to celebrate when you’re done with your shift. We’ll get out the champagne!”

I numbly agreed and hung up. She sounded so happy. How was I going to tell her that it was all a lie and she would still have to tell her friends that her daughter worked at Joe’s? My foot tapped repeatedly against the tiled floor. *Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud.*

“Congrats on your new job!”

I jumped at the sound of Angela’s voice. I had forgotten that she was in the room. She was smiling at me again, except this time I didn’t smile back. I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Uh, thanks.”

“So, when’s your last day here?” Angela asked.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. I looked up at Angela’s smiling face, blinking rapidly. Maybe I could tell her I was still going to work weekends. Or I didn’t start my job for two months. Maybe she would forget.

All of a sudden, Jane stuck her head into the break room, “Break’s over. I want the truck finished in the next fifteen minutes.”

I smiled at Angela meekly and rushed out of the room before she could demand an answer from me. I walked to the truck in a daze. I guess I was finally a complete failure. I was the girl who lied to her parents and coworkers so she didn’t seem pathetic. I tried to bring the rest of the truck up, but my wrist wouldn’t support the weight of the boxes and I kept fumbling them. Jane finally gave up and sent me to the dish room with a shake of her head. I walked away from her without a word, happy to be dismissed to the one place that I liked in this restaurant. I had no idea what I was going to do next. My mom had probably already told everyone about my new job, and I was positive Angela would let it slip before the end of her shift. Angela wouldn’t mean any harm. She probably thought I wanted everyone to know. Why wouldn’t I? I thought that the emptiness of the dish room might give me clarity or help me snag a PR job in the next twenty-four hours.

I liked to wash dishes because I preferred it to yelling at customers as they walked in the front doors. The dish room was in the far back corner of the restaurant, so no one ventured back there very often and it was quiet. I slipped the rubber gloves onto my hands and closed my eyes, enjoying the silence, only interrupted by the hum of the water heater in the corner. Maybe if I stayed back here, no one would find me and I could just hide forever. I shook my head at the childish thought.

I started the water and let it run until it became hot. I never thought that I would say I enjoyed washing dishes. My mom used to have to threaten me as a child so I would help her clean up after dinner. But at Joe’s I discovered there was a precision to washing dishes. If I pointed the nozzle at the exact right angle, I could clean a dish in one spray. Every dish was like a puzzle that

only I could solve. I picked one up and focused on the rhythm of my method: dish, spray, turn, dump, dish, spray, turn, dump. I spent the last hour of my shift in that rhythm, not letting myself concentrate on my thoughts.

I rushed out of the building when my shift was up. The cold wind made me shiver as I stepped outside. Snow was starting to fall from the clouds and the sky was an overcast grey. I looked up at the falling flakes and blinked them away as they fell on my eyelashes. I needed a cigarette. I dug into the bottom of my purse with my uninjured hand, trying to locate the pack I kept hidden in the pocket for emergencies. It was a habit I had picked up in college and couldn't seem to break. My fingers reached desperately across the smooth fabric but found nothing. *You've got to be kidding me.* I shoved my keys in the driver's side door and flung it open. Here was one more thing I wanted and couldn't have.

I got in the car, turned on the defroster and leaned back, waiting for the heat to clear my windshield. I rubbed my hands together and closed my eyes, letting the silence envelop me. For a moment, I thought about going to my parents' house and having a glass of champagne. My mom would have the crystal champagne flutes out that we used on holidays. She would fill us each a glass and our flutes would make an off-tune melody of chimes as we clinked them together to celebrate my accomplishment. A combination of pride and tears would fill the corners of my mom's eyes as my dad proposed a toast. She would lean over to grab my hand, her skin clammy against my ice-cold fingers.

"I always knew that you could do it," my dad would say, reaching over to give me a hug. He would squeeze just a little too tight like always, and I would let my face sink deeper into his chest, so that my breath caught on the snares of his wool sweater, pretending it was real and sharing their thrill. Even if it was just for a minute.