

Scum

Hayden Garris

I hope I work with her today. I hope she brings booze. A couple of shooters should do it. Enough to get drunk but not too much or else I won't be able to drive home. My highs don't last as long as they used to. I need another person working in the kitchen so I can have a few smoke breaks. Two cigarettes left. I'll only smoke half of one and save the other half for later. Shit. No one's working the specialty board today. I'm on my own.

Orders pile up. I hate those coupons. Ten sandwiches. Drop fries. Twenty sandwiches. Cook patties and chop onions. Thirty sandwiches. Do the dishes, scrub the floors, clean the hoods. Forty sandwiches. Grab the wrappers, toast buns, change gloves, salt fries, sanitize the board, refill ketchup, take out the trash. Come back in. Fifty sandwiches.

I need a cigarette. A drink. To get high. I need to get through this shift. Call me a degenerate, an addict, a cog in America's obese machine. One of many. It's fast food. We're greasy, missing teeth, come in all shapes and sizes, and covered in scum. Maybe we are scum. Scum feeding each other scum. Thousand-calorie burgers cooked, built, and served by the lowest of the low.

Pedophiles, abusers, drug dealers. The worst kind of people. But few of them last. Fast food isn't for the weak. But it doesn't weed out all the cowards. I should know. No time for self-reflection in this environment. Watch the screen. Watch coworkers come and go. Finish the never-ending list. Don't cry when they complain—the manager or the customers. If it gets too hard, smoke or drink something. It always gets too hard. Accept your role as scum and buy a pack of Winston blacks. Light cigarettes are for the weak. Don't worry about the wheezing, the insurance here won't cover it anyway.

I get depressed looking at the schedule. I stopped recognizing the names. All my friends disappeared. Maybe that's why I don't get attached anymore when I train new employees. They won't last more than a few months at most. How did I do it for thirteen? I could say the vices helped. But vice is an imagined crutch by someone too weak to handle their reality. I'm too weak. Maybe all the people who left were too weak. I miss them anyway. Even those that the drugs made me forget. They aren't all bad. The people, I mean.

My favorite manager's little brother, fresh out of prison, might've been my favorite. He had a bad past with drugs. Prescription. He came out sober though, besides weed and beer, and promised to keep it that way. I judged him before he

came because of what I'd heard, and the ankle monitor he wore. He lifted a metal tray above my head and I flinched. I apologized and he said, "It's alright, bub."

He always called me bub. I'd been wrong about him. He had a good heart. He inspired me. He was a doer. Not someone with all sorts of plans and ideas, but a guy who gets things done. When he saw a tree in the road, he got out, before I could put the car in park, to move it. Once our path had been cleared, he kept going. He wanted to clear the way for oncoming traffic too. I hope he goes far. But few in fast food do.

I liked that kid who always slid across the greasy floors like an ice dancer. The one who sang along to *Santeria* with me in the back while we made sandwiches. Whenever I came in, he clapped me on the back and his face lit up. We had chemistry in the kitchen like no one else. We understood each other. But he left before I had the chance to say goodbye. He worked two jobs, and fast food didn't pay enough.

I miss the girl I fell in love with. Who snuck back from the front to bother me while I was still learning the ropes. I made dumb jokes, trying to make her laugh. She had a smile I couldn't get enough of. We snuck off to the freezer to kiss. When we got back, others laughed because they knew. We rescued each other from bad relationships. But when she left, she couldn't save me from myself. From losing fifty pounds living on cigarettes and Red Bull. Or gaining it all back and then some when I started getting drunk every shift.

I embraced the lifestyle at a certain point. But I didn't always turn to vice. I want to blame my first night shift manager. The one who snorted meth in the kitchen closet. The one who offered me a bump, telling me it would get me through the night. The one who supplied my first cigarette, and the hundreds after. The one who asked and received naked pictures from my first girlfriend there. The one who slept with the coked-up girl working at the gas station while I ran the store alone.

I don't hate him. He introduced me to more than the vices that fast food runs on. He introduced me to scum. Scum uses scum. He used my car to meet his mom so they could plan to beat and rob someone for meth money. He used my money to buy a case of beer so he could get drunk before his girlfriend and her son came home. He used, yelled, and threatened to kill. But he called me his little brother. I can't explain it, but a bond makes you ignore the scum right in front of you. He was scum and I loved him.

Scum isn't all bad. Maybe it calls you bub, sings *Santeria* with you, or rescues you from a bad relationship. Or maybe it calls you its little brother as it lights your first cigarette for you. Maybe, on some level, we're all a type of scum.

I took this job as a stepping stone. I needed the experience. Back then, my hairline didn't recede, I weighed a healthy amount, and I didn't drink or smoke. I wore a button-up and black slacks with a belt to the job interview. I even printed out my resume for the meeting. The GM laughed when I handed her the paper.

"I just want you to know, fast food workers are the scum on the bottom of people's feet," she said. I laughed the comment off and took the job.

But I'm done laughing now.