

Shakes was only a quick two-minute drive from Parson West High School and was the regular after-game hangout spot for hormone-raging teens and overly involved and optimistic parents alike. It occupied a small space in a back parking lot of a sagging and weathered Buffalo Wild Wings, which was also an appropriate pre-game meal. Shakes had no room for anything but the frozen machines and chilled employees who would pop their heads out of two walk-up windows or the convenient, and fairly new, drive-in addition which practically no one used.

I dreaded everything about the back-to-school buzz as well as the intensely celebrated football season in my hometown. No matter how much I thought I hated game nights when I was in high school, tearing down the assorted pastel papers that were plastered to my locker advertising each “big game,” I never thought I would grow even more sour towards the stupid thing. I’m well aware that I can only blame myself for settling with community college for my first year. “People who start at community college, stay at community college,” everyone would tell me, but I was certain that I was different. Those people weren’t determined enough, but I was ready to hit the world. All I had to do was save money and everything would be good as gold. But a year went by and a summer steamed up the plated window to my future, and there I was; becoming what I hated in the place I was so excited to leave with all of the other people I dreaded to see and it gave me few moments of positive thinking. I was not different.

“Way to hustle, Kit. Way to huuuustle!” Tiffany, at the dangerous height of 4 foot 8 inches, swung her broad arms and latched onto my shoulders that were at least a foot higher up. Her small feet tip-toed at first and fell back flat as her meaty claws caused an unnatural curve in my back. She was a person I couldn’t hate, but tried to anyways.

“Tiffany, I’m not that flexible. Please don’t do that.” I pushed away at my excitable manager with the strawberry shake Styrofoam cup that I had been filling for a customer. The

gesture didn't faze her enthusiasm so I set the cup out the window and grumbled a "have a good night" to whatever townie awaited the treat.

"Kit-Kat, what do I keep telling you? Call me Tiff! All my pals call me Tiff, right guys?" *Tiff* turned sharply, spinning like a cue ball ready strike. Three guys pretended to clean so intensely that they had momentarily lost the ability to hear our boisterous boss.

Evan however ran up and shouted, "Absolutely, Tiff!" The *f* trailed a bit too long and when Tiff smiled and went to shoulder-sag one of the busy-bee cleaners, Evan rolled his eyes and sat on the counter. His three metal clip keychain holders, two blue, one green, that were attached to his belt loop, despite the fact that no keys were on it, scraped against the chipping chrome-rusted surface.

"Don't encourage her," I started as I turned back from the small front window. "She's 34 and manages an ice cream shack shaped like a giant milkshake. She doesn't need encouragement."

"Oh, come on. We're the highlight of her day."

"That's nauseatingly sad. Get down, I need to clean the counter."

Evan shoved a hand into an oversized maraschino cherry jar and plopped one into his mouth, stem still attached and sugary red water-syrup running down his barely scuffed chin. "Ah, come on! We've got another hour 'til we can go home. Make one of the newbies do it. I mean, look at 'em go."

The three boys cleaned everything they could think of while Tiff chit-chatted away about the exciting and monumental claim to her existence that she is actually at the cutoff height of being considered a dwarf. I cringed.

"Do they still say dwarf?" She interrupted herself abruptly. "I can never keep up with

political correctness. Who knows? Fact is, I ain't one of them!" Tiff is a person that does not laugh. What she does is somewhere in between a chuckle and a chortle, throwing her head back violently as if she grew up with the notion that the more you move, the funnier something is.

I waited to see what the boys were going to do next. Their half of the kitchen was spotless and there was nowhere else to venture but to where Evan and I watched, but crossing those few feet would mean more of an interaction with Tiff. Before I could give a full smile towards their struggles, I instead squinted in disbelief as the one with a complete body coating of freckles and a festering nose ring sprayed a bottle of disinfectant with more disinfectant and then proceeded to clean the cleaner container. *Bravo. What commitment.*

"Excuse me?" At the window was a freshly showered football player that had to bend down to peak into the kitchen. I felt like his name would be Jake. Or Todd. At his waist was a small brunette flicking cigarette ashes onto the thin ledge where finished orders would go for each customer.

"What can I get you?" My voice naturally went a few pitches higher when I auto-piloted into customer service mode. I could feel Evan's knee against my side shaking as he stifled a laugh at my fake attempts at kindness.

"Uh, yeah, could I, uh, get a double chocolate chip waffle cone and, uh, whatchu want, babe?"

She looked towards some far off and incredibly boring place as she flicked more ashes towards my face. "Small vanilla shake. No whipped cream."

"Alright, that'll be \$5.93." The girl walked off as the all-star was left chasing loose change that exploded from his wallet. He gave an embarrassed and apologetic smile that I genuinely returned because I felt bad about his lacking suaveness. I thought about how this guy

would nervously act like a gentleman and that girl would put out because she has a right to her body and what it wants. But what he wouldn't get is the emotional connection he felt that he needed to be in a meaningful relationship. "Thanks, it'll be just a minute," I said as he turned to his girlfriend and smacked her ass, making sure to linger and squeeze like he was palming Play-Doh. My face fell. I liked my perfect-world-version of him better.

I scooped and blended away, and Evan, still lounging on the counter, did his part by placing the cherries on top with care but then proceeded to put more in his red-stained mouth. "Stop eating those."

"Wait, watch me tie the stem with my tongue. Doesn't that mean something unbelievably sexy?" He moved his shoulders in a slow and supposedly sexy motion while his mouth contorted awkwardly. The jock grabbed his order from the ledge and laughed in a bro manner at Evan.

"I doubt it."

"I can't do it," Evan held the stem between his teeth. "Want to help me?" He then resumed his sexy shoulder dance.

"Grow up, douche." I smacked his head and grabbed a towel to start cleaning.

"There will be no abuse in my establishment!" Tiff roared over to the two of us and then nudged me on the hip with her elbow. "Unless someone really deserves it! Am I right?!" Tiff had caused me to jump because despite how long I had known her, I never paid close enough attention to where her small, round existence would be prowling.

I gave a pathetic "heh-heh" and started wiping down the blenders. When I ignored the line of people at the window, Evan dramatically groaned and let his shoulders slump as he slid off the counter. "Can I hellllp you?" he wined and I couldn't help but smile.

As the sound of buzzing teens and idling engines drifted away, so did the collective employee energy. Since Tiff was so impressed with her new workers (their names still fuzzy in my mind) she let them go early and put off training them how to close for the next night. And I knew all too well that it would be me trying to explain to the fresh meat how to fill out a deposit slip and how to turn off the soft 80's hits that played on loop.

“Hey, superstar. Mind if I ask you a mega fave?” Tiff pouted and shoved her cheek down against her fist. Usually people who do this would have their elbow supported against a surface, but since Tiff's arm could not reach the “abnormally high” countertops, she used her other arm to wrap around her middle and act as her own table.

“I guess.” There was nowhere to run in this cramped establishment.

“See, the thing is Diana has to take her grandma to the doctor in the morning. So I was hoping that you could open, prep, and be here for the delivery guy in the morning.”

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Diana was a few years older than me but acted like an irresponsible teenager when it came to working. During her employment at Shakes, five of Diana's grandmothers had died and two others had to be put in a home. Tiff never kept track of these lies, but when it was me who had to cover endless last-minute shifts, I could never forget the excuses.

“I already close.”

“I'll give you a two-hour break. And I'll buy your lunch!”

“Tiffan—“

“Tiff. Just Tiff,” she interrupted with a stiff smile.

“Tiff. I've worked six days in a row and I work the next eight. I need a break.”

There was a pause and Tiff began to soften. “I'll pay you time and a half this weekend.”

My expression did not change. I knew a victory was near.

“Oh, you’re a tough one. Time and a half until your next day off.”

“Fine. And that is on top of the lunch you’re paying for tomorrow. I’m also calling people from the application pile. You need more managers.”

“Oh, stop dropping hints,” Tiff playfully, yet viscously, slapped my wrist. “I am well aware that you are management material. Just give it time.” She started bounding towards the back door.

“No! I don’t want to be a manager! You just need to stop...” the door slammed close. “...hiring 16-year-olds that quit after a month.” I finished in a defeated whisper and grabbed my bag.

“I hear ya, man.” Evan lifted his body up from leaning into the ice cream bins that he was covering for the night.

“Let’s just go.”

Evan led the way out the door where Tiff had just disappeared as I switched off the music and shut down the lights. The room was glowing a frosty blue color in the dark, which always struck me as mystical. There was nothing really present to cause the effect besides the fact the word “cold” is generally related to the color “blue.” Or perhaps it was just the optical adjustment from turning off the stark white fluorescent bulbs that made my eyes water, even during the shortest of shifts.

On weekday nights when I closed by myself, I often imagined what would happen if I became trapped in this frozen hell. What would have caused the lock-in? Some kind of alien unleashed on the town? Would it wear our skins and manipulate our simple minds? Yes, I realized that I mentally lived out the 80’s version of *The Thing*, where I would be Kurt Russell,

frosty ice-clumped beard and all. I would huddle under the mixing counter, maybe with Evan as Keith David. There we would sit, breath crystalizing as it escapes our lips, laughing about how life brought us there, each wondering if the other held the monster within.

I stepped out into the warm August air and felt moisture bead up along the back of my neck. It freaked me out, feeling the chill melt off my skin instantly, and it made my body tense.

“Hey Kit, did I mention how nice you looked today?” Evan sucked hard at the red straw coming out of his peanut butter shake. The thick paste barely budged the shadow in the plastic tube.

“Yes, I’ll give you a ride.” I released the tight elastic band from my ponytail and ran my fingers through the dent it had left behind. I gently massaged my scalp where the tingling ache of having my hair pulled back too tight for far too long set in.

“Can’t I just want to give you a compliment without some pitiful motive?” Like a child, he hopped and crunched down against the abandoned glass shards that were sprinkled across the pavement. I had never witnessed a dramatic and truly destructive accident occur in the parking lot, but every so often, more and more debris found its way there, particles finding grooves in my sneaker to fuse to.

“Absolutely not,” I replied while stepping around the glittering flecks.

“Oh, I suppose you’re right. What would I do without you?”

“What do you do without me?”

“I don’t know, actually. I black out when you’re away from me,” he kneeled dramatically into a wide lunge and proclaimed, “For you are my light in this grand abyss!”

I sighed, spread out my palm against his face so that his nose poked in between my index and middle finger, and gave his head a good shove backward. “Jesus, get in the car.”

As I tugged at the frayed red lanyard that knotted against the random assortment in my messenger bag, a blue pickup truck with a rusted white trim rolled up slowly between where my car was parked and where the now dim and abandoned-looking milkshake hut settled.

“Hey! You guys closed?” A man in a camouflage hat shouted over his driver friend who continued to look forward.

“Yeah,” Evan yelled back. “Closed at 11:00.”

The man punched the dash and screamed, “God dammit!” as the driver slammed on the gas and the truck squealed out slightly too slow to make a grand statement.

“What the fuck was that?” I stared after the broken taillights.

“When that man wants ice cream, he *wants* some fucking ice cream!” Evan removed the lid to his shake and patted the bottom of the cup to loosen the paste, leaving behind a beige and cartoonish milk mustache.

“Nice.”

After the brief discussion of what sustenance was calling to Evan’s innards, I headed to the main strip of fast-food chains that was practically the center of town. We idled behind a line of cars in the blue and white drive-thru at Culver’s. The new “cotton fresh” tree that hung from the rearview mirror was giving off warm and linen-y bursts that were mixing with the thick exhaust pouring out of a rusted tailpipe two cars up.

“I feel sick,” I said as I closed my eyes and let the red glow of the brake lights in front of me be an indicator of when to open them again.

“You just need to eat something. I saw you eat a pineapple ring and a chocolate chip today. Who are you trying to impress?”

“It’s hard to make time to eat when you’re the only one working.”



“Touche. Next time, I’ll find a way to make myself work for ten minutes so you can take care of yourself.” He smiled. “But only ten minutes. I cannot work a second more.” Evan dramatically placed the back of his left hand to his forehead imitating some glamorous old-Hollywood dame.

Our turn in line finally came and after, I pulled out onto the road and handed the bags to Evan.

“Make sure everything is there. And don’t eat in the ca—” Evan interrupted me with a “whoopsie.”

“Evan, are you kidding me right now? What did I *just* say? What do I *always* say? I *just* cleaned this out.” I reached my hand into the compartment between us and jumbled around Sharpie doodled CDs to pull out extra napkins, all the while checking frantically in all directions so I could turn left into Evan’s apartment complex.

“I’m so sorry. Oh, god. I can get it,” he yelled as he shoved the handful of soggy steaming fries, two of which were just lost to the depths of the *in-between* (the small and impossible space between the passenger seat and the middle partition), into his mouth instead of dropping them back into the white and grey-greased paper bag. Evan opened and closed his mouth like a gaping fish out of water to allow small bursts of cool air into his scorching mouth.

“She wasn’t kidding,” he grumbled through the potato mush that he could not swallow. “These came out hotter than hell.” Without a pause, he slipped his hand into the narrow crevice and live-long-and-prosper-clawed at the rogue fries.

“You live two minutes from Culver’s. You couldn’t wait two minutes?!”

I jerkily pulled into one of the permit parking spots designated for Evan’s apartment, but since he didn’t own a car, I just used it.

“Yes! I got ‘em...ew gross!” He pulled up the two now limp and balled up French fries with a delicate coating of dirt, lint, and dark brown hairs that had over time fallen from my head and collected in a horrifying mass. “I thought you said you cleaned in here?” He shook the pile about, allowing clumps of dirt to begin separating from each other. It broke apart quickly, but before half of the ball could land on his lap, my hairs held everything together. He shrieked and threw it out of the window. We watched the cluster finally tug away from the fries, catch a breeze, drift along two empty parking spaces, and finally settle on a rusted yellow fire hydrant that was inconveniently placed on the parking lot asphalt instead of perched safely on the curb. “I guess I now understand your definition of clean.”

“Hey, there is no cleaning car-purgatory. It’s your own damn fault that you had to go in there. You’re lucky you came back out with all your digits.” I wiggled my fingers in his face and then felt like a child, so I stopped.

We unbuckled, got out with the music still humming from the late-night 80’s blast on 104.9, and sat on top of the hood. Even though there were no dents, I always imagined permanent butt-prints from all the times we did this.

“Single plain burger with plain unsalted fries and the finest paper cup o’ water for my lady.” Evan rolled his eyes as he carefully set out my safe and usual order. I know how I like things and I like not getting violently ill in the middle of the night because I was feeling adventurous with fast food. I grabbed his bag and spilled out the contents.

“Triple stack, extra cheese heart attack with double order salted fries and a plastic bucket of neon high-fructose corn syrup for ma’ lord.”

With a joyous “amen,” Evan sunk his teeth into the monstrosity and I watched the layers of offensively orange cheese and oozing tomato-pickle paste shift and slide.

“You’re repulsive.”

“At least I’m not in your car,” he replied mockingly and gave me a drippy smile.

I let him fill his mouth again before I asked, “Want to take my morning shift?” A gurgle was his first response and before he could officially say “no” I added a drawn out “pleeeeeease?”

The ball of grease went down his throat in an overly graphic and disturbing way as if a perfect sphere forced its way down. “Nice try. But sorry, love. I requested tomorrow off. You should try it some time.”

Ignoring the jab at my lack of “me time,” I rolled my eyes. “What do you need tomorrow off for? Doing an all-day drink-a-thon with your buds?”

“Ha, ha. Actually no. I’m going with my family to my niece’s birthday party. Super lame I know. I hear they’re not even having an open bar. How dare them. It’s the big 0-3. Let the kid let loose, am I right?”

“Shit, I’m sorry. Why am I such an asshole?” I found myself doing this too often with Evan. We played our bitter parts so well that I forgot sometimes that he wasn’t an actual piece of shit. He was a decent person that I liked to drag down to my level of cynicism. Then again, Evan liked to be dragged. And sometimes I knew he only liked being dragged by me.

“You’ve got to be to hang out with mess,” he smiled. “But just because you’re so damn cute when you’re all self-loathing and whatnot, I’ll take any of your other days. I can handle it.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“Now don’t I get some kind of token of your gratitude?”

“A French fry?” I offered even though Evan always ate out of my bag anyways even though he had his own larger size.

“Nah, how about a kiss?” He started the “sexy” shoulder dance from before and I

punched his arm as hard as I could. He pretended it hurt but we both knew better. “Fine,” he said as he took my whole bag of fries. I protested and he just laughed, shoving some in his mouth and throwing others at me.

He always did that. Try to flirt and then take it back as soon as I denied whatever it was. And in some way, I loved him for that. *Love* may not have had anything to do with it, and that is why I put off figuring it out as long as I could. But every time, he took it back a little less and that night was the night I noticed that every accidental touch and every teasing nudge lingered a little longer than the time before and something started to crack open inside of me.