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A DAY IN THE PARK

SECOND PLACE, JENNIE HACKMAN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

In the morning, before they start the rides up, it's pretty quiet. It's serene. You don't have the kids screaming or the music pumping in from some secret speakers mixing with the carnival sounds. All you've got are some lazy zombie kids coming through in packs, punching time cards, trying to remember their social security numbers, flashing each other hellos with their sluggish eyes, and then manning whichever posts they had to for the day. It wasn't all kids. Sometimes, you'd get a few greasy older guys coming through. I know a few of the slightly younger ones were repairmen and painters, and some cooks. The cooks, I knew 'cause I worked at the dingy restaurant in the park. There were two main cooks, Eddie and Steve. Eddie was a Puerto Rican in his twenties whose other job was a birthday party clown. Steve was massive and his eyes were set back in his face, where they were almost covered by a layer of fat drooping down from his forehead. I think he had a fifth grade education, and he had definitely been locked up. I knew because they were talking about some special papers he needed signed or something as they were sipping out of thick white plastic cups with smiling pandas on them, park cups, filled with stolen beer from the restaurant taps.

I hadn't worked there for that long, maybe a month or so, maybe two. I stopped counting and caring. We had to wear these navy tee shirts with obnoxious yellow letters on the back that said "STAFF," and khaki shorts or pants. Pretty boring. Everything was the same, so the days started seeming that way too. When I got the shirt and my plastic nametag (back when they smelled new, not like charred hotdogs and fried dough), I was thrilled. A blonde girl who was probably only really a year older asked me my name without looking me in the eyes once. There were a bunch of them giving the tags out. Somehow they reminded me of these girls that used to help our teachers out in first grade—seventh-graders that seemed at least ten feet tall. They always were so put-together, responsible, self-assured. And we as six-year-olds, covered in jelly and eraser-shavings, our white shirts dirtied in pencil smudges, watched them with our jaws hanging open. Some of the little girls imitated the big ones, smacking gum and tying scrunchies in their knotted hair. When I finally got to seventh grade, I still felt small.

I followed her quick hands as she scrawled my name with a

black marker on a shiny white card with a pin on the back.

“Thanks, hon!” she said, still not physically acknowledging me.

“Thanks?” I answered as I stumbled out of the supply room staring at the tag. I was finally someone, like a part of something, and I had this badge to prove it. The jerks they got to energize us at the orientation meeting (I think “fellow employees” were what they were supposed to be, but I’m sure the higher-up bastards just shelled out the couple bucks they saved by not giving out extra napkins to people and hired themselves some joke enthusiastic motivational speakers) made us feel like we were all pieces of a whole, all people working towards the general happiness and wellbeing of the park. Hell, of human-kind, I don’t know, it was just a really nice feeling at first. We were a team. I guess I’m the jerk then, in the long run, because I genuinely believed all of this.

When we first got here, like before we really started punching the hamburger keys and making change and all that jazz, we sort of did this little getting-to-know-you game. Me and all the rest of the kids were put into groups and forced to ask each other questions like favorite this, favorite that. I hadn’t really worked much, I mean, all I did before was help my dad out here and there at his store, making whatever he felt like giving me, sometimes being paid entirely in candy. It wasn’t real, the park. I remember when I was around seven or eight, I’d ride this one huge roller coaster they had right near the lake, *The Wizard*. It was green and white wood, and rickety as all hell, but it made you jump. It really had a great fake-out, where it’d go around this sharp right angle corner, only it would really jerk to one side, and you’d get to see the lake for half a second right up close, and you’d think you’d just about die, fall right in. But then it would grab you back, and send you down a terrific hill. It was great. My dad was the only one who’d go on it with me too. It was all teenage boys, usually, and half of them looked like they’d puke before the car even went two inches. I couldn’t believe the thing; I couldn’t believe how huge it was and how nobody ever fell off of it. Now, I’d pass it all the time. I’d pass all of the rides, the *Saturn*, the *Tilt-A-Whirl* which I never went on because I hate spinning rides. Even the *Frog Pond*, which was like a fishing game where you had to catch frogs and win prizes. This was where I was going to be every day. I felt seven again, right at the meeting. I don’t know if it was the cotton candy smell or the surreal unevenness of the paved paths, but something was making me believe it. It really was.

Well, cut to me, alone, crouched next to the toilet, bawling my stupid eyes out. All they have is that rough brown paper stuff, and it leaves faded red burns on my cheeks when I wipe the tears off of my face.

They can't even get you something nice to wipe your ass with. You're already in a room that smells like horse manure and puke, this terrible bathroom, and you'll probably leave with scorched genitals from these stupid brown paper towels. Not to be graphic or anything. But seriously, why the hell should I care? I thought back, and I replayed the day in my head. I tried to see where it went wrong. Maybe where I went wrong.

It was a birthday party day, which is quite possibly the worst kind of day at the park. Well, no, that's not really true; there are some pretty horrible days here. The worst one, though, I never had to personally deal with. It only happened at the hot dog stand, not at the restaurant. It's called "Quarter Hot Dog Night" which is a malicious trick that the bosses made up to get all the park kids crying before the night's over. I mean it's gotta be. Everyone comes with thick rolls of quarters, and you already know they're cheap to begin with, and they want to buy like seven hundred hot dogs. The grill kids are churning the hot dogs out and sweating and red-faced and the cashiers are doing math in their heads, but they can never go fast enough. I'm sure half the time they're just staring into space, dreaming of a world where stale hot dog buns and plastic soda cups and creaky roller coasters don't exist. You wouldn't think you'd need a whole lot of math anyway, because there are only four quarters in a dollar. Well, that's where the "get all the kids" part comes in; those bosses, some evil, maniacal bastards sitting in some room drooling over stacks of coins, figure that they should be charging tax on Quarter Night. So, all these cashier kids have to tell the sweaty fat dads in tank tops that don't quite cover their breasts and creased old ladies with shorts up to their eyes and huge black women with spritzer-fans that well actually there's unfortunately, an, umm, a...well there's a tax on th-the hot dogs so it's actually twenty-seven cents. Let's just say those people aren't too thrilled about that.

But besides those nights, the birthdays were the toughest for the restaurant people. You gotta get all this food ready for these rich asshole kids, because they all want the ice cream cake at the perfect temperature, the cheese even on the burger, you know, that kind of stuff. But other than that, you've got the regular customers, with screaming toddlers, tired eyes, and a budget. And oh, yeah. We charge inordinate prices for a hotdog. So, they blame you. But it was going okay.

The only major incident was when this hefty older lady with pink cotton drawstring shorts came in with a bunch of kids and the kids wanted Sprite. I dug the cup in the ice bin, which was almost half full of water, and shoved it under the soda machine. As soon as I clicked the metal bar back, I could see big black chunks coming out with the clear liquid. Mangled thoraxes of carpenter ants. Luckily, the lady didn't see.

I told her we were all out and gave her Coke. As soon as the line of hungry jerks cleared, I ran to tell one of the bosses. He was eating a sandwich. Eddie and Steve weren't doing anything either, just kind of leaning against the grills, talking about how big this girl from the pizza stand's tits were or something. My boss swallowed his mouthful of bread and just told me to let the soda machine run, and to let the ants trickle their way through, and then I would "be good."

It wasn't too busy after all that day though, besides the party, and I got my break kind of early. See, the thing about me and work is that no matter how hard it was, how boring it was, how stupid what they actually asked me to do might have been, I still did it. And I did it with a smile. I never stopped with that fake smile. I was always nice. Even when the idiots yelled about the chicken not being done fast enough and then when they got it, how it was still frozen inside. Even when I knew that I didn't even touch the chicken, that I just punched a key and took the \$9.50, even then, I kept smiling. Even when I knew Eddie didn't cook it all the way on purpose just to mess with the customers and laugh because he didn't get the brunt of it, even then. Even when they got mad and cursed. My lips might have shaken, it might have burned, but it was still there. I always smiled. I always did anything extra. I wiped down counters, pulled down spider webs. Yeah, even if a spider was on the web. It freaked me out, but I did it anyway.

So, like I said, I was on my break. I clocked out but I wasn't hungry, and I knew how the food was made so I sure as hell wasn't eating it. I didn't have anything to do. I felt idle. I decided to walk up to the pizza stand. I knew the kid who worked there, and I knew he was alone. He had something like fifteen pizzas to make, and his hair was sticking up and he was coughing because they stuck him back there with the smoke, and he had asthma. Some Polish kid was usually yelling at him, but today it was just this kid, alone with fifteen uncooked pizzas, a few idiots coming up to order beers, and this ice-faced woman fluttering around with a blonde ponytail. I knew who that woman was. She worked in the back when you have to go cash out your drawer in the finance department, which sounds pretty fancy, but all it was was a shack that smelled like lemon cleaner with these old women in it counting money and writing you up if you were one cent over or under. But she was the head, this blonde one, a real rich lady; she was like a caricature, with a sweater around her delicate neck, sticking her ugly nose in the air as she talked about boating trips in Greenwich or something. Her voice was shrill and thin like her body, sick-lean with too much exercise or too few calories or just bony with hatred. She wasn't old, just snooty. And you could really tell that she didn't want to be stuck working at some

amusement park. I don't know why, but some idiot put her in control of that birthday party I mentioned. So I went up to this kid, mind you, I knew he was working, I'm not stupid, and I asked him if he needed help. Yeah, that's right, I asked him if he needed help, help that I would gladly provide even though I wasn't even getting paid for it. That's the quintessential example of how much I sucked up to these assholes, of how much I tried.

"Yeah, I really, really do need help," he told me.

And you could tell, because his hair was messed up and he was really busy and the smoke was choking every goddamn person in a 1/4-mile radius. So I grabbed some pizzas and I started cutting them, and then this woman comes at us like some she-devil or something.

"Excuse me, you two. Yeah, you, just standing around. Jesus Christ, in case you people haven't noticed, this is a real job. You can't just socialize whenever you want! You know, you really have to learn how to grow up. Let's go! Come on."

I didn't know what to say. I don't remember what I did say. Something meek, something scared.

The kid just said that I was only helping him. I knew he was grinning, that kind where you're in disbelief, the "are you serious?" kind.

"And you," she pointed at me and kind of ticked her lower jaw to one side and put a hand on her hip like I was some idiot child. "Why the hell are you even over here? Go back to your own station and stop fooling around! What do you think this is!? You people really need to learn about professionalism. You think you can just do whatever you want, wherever--"

I had a pizza cutter in my hand. If it was legal, and if I wasn't trying so hard to keep calm, and maybe if I had realized that lump in my throat was rage instead of puke, maybe I would've sliced her up. But instead, because I'm a coward, the tears started. And she started mocking me about that, that woman.

"Oh, yeah, you've got a lot to cry about, don't you? Ha! Please. Get back to wherever the hell you're supposed to be!"

And then I heard her yelling at the kid. I don't know what happened after that, or where I was going. Everything was a blur. And I was running.

I was running fast.

I passed the rides; the colors swirled. I passed The Wizard and it looked small and broken. I got to the hot dog stand and could barely see the restaurant. I stopped right in front of the big overhanging outdoor menu. All the kids I knew from the restaurant saw me. This Asian chick

with long hair held my shoulders. I was shaking more than I had ever shaken in my life. They got my restaurant boss. He said something about the woman, called her a bitch maybe, that she shouldn't have been yelling at "his kids." He told me to go to the bathroom, to clean myself up.

"Do you wanna leave?"

"No," I said. I couldn't believe the words.

So I was scrunched in the stall, crying, crying, crying, crying about the yelling, about everything in my life. Crying because I was sixteen and insignificant. Crying because I had to go back with a red face and puffy eyes and everyone would ask questions.

I went back. I went and I unwrinkled my blue t-shirt and I rubbed hard at my red eyelids and I went to my drawer and pressed the "sale" button. Nobody noticed that I had been crying. They just wanted their hamburgers.