

The Dairy King

Helen glances at me with a calculating eye. Our gazes lock, and I notice the murky brown of her eyes. Deep crevasses radiate from the corners of her eyes. Her hands, tattered by years of work in the food service industry, lightly grip a spatula. She scans the back room, absorbing every detail of the familiar surroundings. It's as though we are at the heart of an immensely complex machine. Stainless steel appliances surround us. Their surfaces glint with the dull sheen of well-scrubbed metal – unmarred except for an even coating of hair-like scratches. My eyes find themselves drawn to the centerpiece of the room: a monster of an oven wrapped around two stacked conveyor belts. A small slip-printer chirps at the end of the prep table and spits out an order. Juan runs to it, tears the sheet out, and pins it to a rail above him. He sprints to a towering stack of bread trays behind the oven and grabs a pack of buns. His fingers rip the bread tag off with the precision of practice. Juan tears out a bun and places the two halves belly-up on the top belt. He reaches down to his left and pulls a stack of frozen patties out of the cooler. The printer chirps again, adding to Juan's anxiety. Hastily, he digs his fingers beneath the paper separator and pulls the top patty off. The patty crumbles before it reaches the bottom belt. "Shit," he mumbles to himself and throws the patty aside. He tears another patty from the stack and tosses it deep into the maw of the machine. It won't be cooked as well, but at least it'll be out the other side in time. Helen decides to remind Juan of what he already knows. "Better step it up Juan. The lunch rush is far from over and these orders have to be out in sixty seconds." He grunts a half-reply but is interrupted by another jarring set of beeps. My jaw goes slack as the printer feeds a foot-long order out. "God damn it," Juan curses. "Thirty seconds to order, 5 minutes to make.

I've only got two god damn hands. Who the hell do they think they are?" He throws an armful of buns onto the belt and adds another load of patties to the set already rolling through.

I am snapped back to reality by the sound of Helen's dry voice. "Well, this is the heart of Dairy Queen. As you can see, our lunch rush is pretty intense. The punch clock is there in the corner, the coats and hats go on that rack, and the stairs to the stock room are right over there." She points to the separate areas of the store; apparently enjoying the look of fear slowly creeping over my face. She leads me over to the corner and hands me card with my name scrawled on the top. "The punch only changes time every five minutes – and that's your grace time. If the punch says you're late, we're going to have problems." I punch in and she hands me an apron. It smells of spoiled grease. I toss the neck loop over my head and wrap the strings around my waist. The apron is crisp from a coating of dried condiments.

"Hey Helen, are you busy?" Juan interrupts us. I glance at the rail and see an increasing pile of order-slips. Helen turns to face me. "You ready Lee?" I see Juan, with his seven years of experience, drenched in sweat. I find my stomach tightening with anticipation.

"No, Helen. I'm not."