

CLEAN AND FRESH AND SILENT

by
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JLMC 4

She dug into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out some change, 63¢, and pushed open the door of the cafe. She wove through the small tables and the chairs, the men and the women, to the front along the counter where small red stools swiveled as the patrons moved.

The stools all seemed to creak and grind and the noise mixed with the clatter of the rest of the room. Forks scraped porcelain; chairs grated against the tile floor; someone called out an order:

“Burger, well. Fry. Coke.”

The place droned with talking, a baby crying. Somebody dropped a piece of silverware.

There were empty stools along the outside edges of the counter on either end, but she chose one in the center, near the plastic rectangle which encased rows of pastries, gluey and pale.

The stool she chose was occupied. A tiny old man sat at it, hunched over, eating. She stopped just behind him, slightly to the side, and watched over his shoulder as he ate his pie. He chewed it slowly, moving it from side to side in his mouth, his lips puckered. Some of the apple syrup leaked from the side of his mouth. He swallowed what was in his mouth, leaving the syrup clinging to his whiskers.

His hand shook as he cut another bite. Blue veins and brown speckles covered his arm, visible where his dirty white shirt had been rolled up. Did she have time to wait for him to finish? She looked at her own wrist and then pulled her sleeve down to hide the naked arm.

Moving both feet backwards a step so she could scrutinize him, she noticed his fine white hair which was grey and coarse at the edges. Below the coarse hair was a limp collar, yellowed and beginning to show holes. Her eyes jerked over the wrinkled shirt to the waist of his trousers. No belt. Bending forward, she noticed his legs slowly bouncing up and down. The paper

napkin tottered unsteadily on his knee. She reached her hand out to stop it from bouncing off onto the floor.

“Ma’am.”

She felt a tap on her shoulder and jumped around. A middle-aged man stared at her. She looked quickly to the floor.

“Either sit down and eat, or I’m going to ask you to leave.”

She looked at his bony knees, then back at the floor.

“Did you hear me?” His voice was firm now.

She looked up at his mouth, held in a straight line, thin and even. Then it twitched. She saw it twitch and started to smile, stopped herself, and looked at his nose. The nostrils were moving in and out.

“Are you deaf? I asked you to leave. Get out!”

She lowered her eyes to his shoes and noticed how dull the floor was he stood on.

“O.K.,” she muttered.

A sweet odor from the pastries and an evil acidness from someone’s onion rings cut through her nostrils and churned inside her throat. The floor was dirty with heel marks and grease and dirt. So ugly. And the door was so awfully heavy at her arms. She leaned against it and got outside. The money, still in her hand, suddenly became cold and she shoved it into her back pocket, snagging her fingernail on a loose thread. She yanked at the thread until it came loose from inside her pocket. Rolling it between her thumb and first finger until it became a tiny ball, she threw it as hard as she could. But the breeze caught it and landed it somewhere by her feet.

As she began walking, she noticed the sound of the cars whizzing by on the street. She noticed the pangs rising up from her stomach, up through her chest cavity, up, until they reached her throat. She swallowed them back and wrapped her sweater tighter around her waist, and folded her arms over it.

Cars were still whizzing by. Three, four, five, she counted. “Those damn cars,” she thought as another one sped by. Six. Seven. Eight. She let go of her sweater to cover her ears with her hands, and then shut her eyes. A truck shifted as

it zoomed by. She gritted her teeth and kept walking.

“Got to get away from this noise. Walk away from it.”

Someone honked and brakes screeched. Her eyes flew open and she saw herself in the middle of traffic. The driver of the car had his horn blasting and was waving his other arm. She saw his lips move. She watched his arm as he motioned her back to the sidewalk. She looked to her side. Nobody was there. Why should she go back? No one was waiting over there for her. She looked back at the driver. He was still motioning her back. She looked beside him in the car. A little boy was staring at her, wide-eyed. She decided to go to the sidewalk.

She ran to get away from that loud horn. It was so loud. So very loud.

She felt her legs running and heard her breath coming hard and fast. Running, the sound of her shoes hitting the hard sidewalk, the weight pounding at the small of her back. Around the corner, running, panting in the thick air, her heart beating faster and faster. Then she didn't feel her legs under her anymore but she knew she was still moving because the dirt and the litter beside the building moved up and down, up and down, keeping time with her heart and her hair that bounced off her shoulders.

She heard her money jingling in her pocket. Across a street. Running. Around another corner. More garbage here. The cars whizzed. Across a street. Someone honked. A tricycle sitting beside the building, rusty, broken. She pushed herself faster. Her breathing came harder, her face was hot. So hot. A stomach pang. The pain moved up inside her. Up, up as she ran. It reached her throat but she couldn't swallow it back. Up through her face the pain went, past her hot mouth and her nostrils moving in and out, past her cheekbones. And then she felt the pain explode and her eyes clouded over.

She stopped running and tried to focus. Everything looked like a blur. The sun reflected off of her eyes and onto everything she tried to look at.

Oh, isn't it all so pretty. So pretty as the cars and the buildings gleamed. Even the air seemed fresher. And the engines of the cars seemed boxed in cotton.

She looked down at her hands to see them blurry. She

took a deep breath of the new air. It slid smoothly into her nose and open mouth and down through her throat and filled her lungs. She listened to the faint sound of the cars, hushed on the street.

Then she felt something on her cheek. Her finger touched it. It was wet. She touched her finger to her tongue. Salty. She rubbed her eyes. The pretty went away and the greyness and the dullness came back. Dull. The buildings were dull. The cars looked dull. They needed washing. She looked at her shoes. Dirty. But she had just cleaned them. She looked back at the tricycle behind her, broken.

She tasted the air. It had turned rancid and thick. She forced it out of her lungs and tried to hold her breath but her heart was beating hard and she had to give it some of that horrible stale air. She tried to take it in small breaths. Stale.

The noise of the street filled up her ears and rushed inside her head, rattling and clattering, darting around the inside of her brain.

She needed something clean and fresh and silent. Where was it? She whirled around on the sidewalk. She couldn't find it. Clean. It had to be here somewhere. Fresh air and silence. Where were they? She had to find them again. Somewhere. She began walking, slowly. She carefully stepped over the cracks in the sidewalk, and let her arms hang limply at her sides. Her hair was calm now, not bouncing.

A small breeze blew at her face, drying it, drying the saltiness until her face felt caked. Nice. But the pain in her stomach was rising to her throat again. Where were the things she wanted?

Rounding a corner, careful that she might bump into anyone, she stepped wide, almost at the curb, watching the cracks. As she got around to the other side, she saw a small child. It was playing in the green grass beside a big brick house. That's nice. She headed towards it as she watched the cracks.

"Careful of the cracks, can't break my mother's back," she whispered. "My mother's back." She tiptoed over one crack, then another.

"Mother's back." It was a small boy playing in the grass.

“Mother. Careful.” Another crack. “So many cracks.” The boy was rolling a ball in the grass. She was almost there.

“Mother. I’m a mom. Can’t break my back. Don’t step on the cracks. Break your mother’s back. Joey, don’t step on the cracks. Joey.”

She stopped. “JOEY! Joey, don’t step on the cracks.” She watched the little boy’s ball roll across the grass and bounce off the curb onto the street. He ran after it. A car sped by from behind. Someone shouted. Brakes screeched.

She felt her face grow hot. Then it became wet, and her hands started to shake, and her knees weakened.

“Not on a crack, can’t sit on a crack.” She slumped forward and felt the wetness roll down her cheeks. Down to her chin, ready to slip off her face. She sat on the sidewalk.

She looked back at the brick house. It wasn’t there. The little boy wasn’t there. The green grass wasn’t there. An old man was the only thing she saw, walking down the street, stepping on all the cracks.

“My Joey won’t run into the street anymore. I won’t let him. He might get run over.” She glared at the old man. “An old man might run over Joey’s little legs and he won’t run to me anymore. No, Joey won’t run into the street again.”

The tears streamed down her face now, flooding out of her eyes, dripping onto her sweater. She slumped against the building behind her while the tears kept flowing. Big salty tears and she didn’t hear anything, she didn’t see anything, and for the first time all day she didn’t feel anything.