

The Sandwich Artist

Jami Kimbrell

Reggie got the promotion. He's only been here two weeks and already he's running the register, got his own key to the safe and everything. Gino, the district manager, says it's because he's got experience but at what, I don't know. He can't add or subtract for shit, but like he said to me his second day as cashier, "These computers do all the work for you. Ain't nobody paying with cash no more anyhow."

After almost two years of constantly having my ass grabbed by the frat guy we got washing the baking sheets and after months of attending online training seminars on everything from foodborne illnesses to contingency plans in case of fire, I thought the job was mine. Before Angela quit to work on her LPN, she talked me up real good to Gino. At first, he let me fill Angela's spot on the line for a few days, told me being a Sandwich Artist came with responsibility, required attention to detail. Some liked their tomatoes seeded, some insisted on folded deli meats instead of flattened slices. The customer is not always right, he had said, but they do always get what they want. I never forgot that. For three weeks, I slung loaves of bread around like they were sandbags and I was preparing for a category 4 hurricane storm surge. Then it ended, and now Reggie has the gig and I haven't quit because I need the extra cash or else I won't be able to pay daycare this month.

With latex gloves up to my armpits, I spend the first thirty minutes of every shift massaging mayonnaise and dill relish into a vat of shredded StarKist tuna. After that, I count out rounds of cookie dough and use a mandolin slicer to prep the onions until the lunch crowd hits, at which point I take my place at the middle of the line. It's my job to handle the sandwiches at the condiment stage before passing them to Reggie for wrapping and payment.

Every afternoon, I go home to my dachshund and three-year-old daughter smelling like oily fish and body odor, but I can't take a bath until nighttime, when both of them are asleep. Even then, it's really just me lying in the tub drinking wine coolers until the water gets too cold for me to actually bathe or wash my hair.

Tonight, I've decided to read in the bath. My neighbor forgets his *Wall Street Journal* on his doormat at least twice a week, so I grabbed it on my way in yesterday. Some of it I understand, like the parts about the economy taking a nose dive after the latest mass shooting in Europe. But, mostly,

it's a lot of numbers and predictions and I think, maybe if I get smarter I can understand all this stuff. Maybe I can go back to college too, and then I won't need this job, and I can move out of this dumpy apartment and get my daughter in one of those fancy daycares where they have a dress code and Bible lessons and music time.

"There's another location opening up on the northeast side of town," Gino said to me today as I was clocking out. "Maybe you could put in a few extra hours over there once it's up and running and see how things go." See how what goes, I thought. Gino was here doing his semi-annual audit and, for a change, he didn't stare at my tits. I took that as a sign I'd done something wrong but maybe I hadn't.

Honestly though, I'm one Bartles and Jaymes away from calling him on his bullshit. Angela is already making twice as much money now that she got on with the nursing home. Yeah, she has to change old man diapers and spoon feed dementia patients on the wing they assigned her to, but she's got good pay and benefits, too. She got a flu shot last week and it didn't cost nothing but a \$10 copay. My daughter hasn't been to the doctor since she was 6 months old and had pneumonia, and forget about me. I got moles morphing into blisters morphing into scabs that I'm pretty sure are some kind of skin cancer, and I'll be damned if I can afford to have them looked at.

My cell is resting on a dry washcloth atop the toilet seat when I hear it vibrating. I lean over the edge of the tub to read the screen. It's Jeremy, probably calling to check on his daughter. If he were any kind of father, he should know that she's been in bed for hours at this point. It rings and rings and I don't answer it, choosing instead to chug the last bit of my drink. When I'm out of the bath and drying off, I scroll through my missed calls for the day and see that I missed a call from Gino. It came in an hour after I'd left work.

Lizzie has me up at 4 a.m., says she thought a giant was outside her window. I pull back the curtains to show her she doesn't have to be afraid. "It's just a tree," I say. "What kind of tree?" she asks without removing her arms from around my neck. "I don't know," I say, and only when I say it do I realize it's true. "But look," I say pointing to the top of the tree, to the place where its limbs close around a power line. "It likes to give hugs, too." I squeeze her against me, and she nods off holding her favorite stuffed bunny rabbit.

It's still dark outside when I drop Lizzie at Playland. The owner hands me a past due notice and then plops Lizzie and her backpack down in front of a television. Two other kids reach up to

me when I walk past them on my way to the parking lot, both of them crying. Once in the car, I listen to the voicemail again from Gino. “We need you to open in the morning. Reggie’s out with a busted knee til at least next week. 6 a.m. Sharp.” There’s no traffic this morning so I arrive early. Gino is waiting.

“Next time, answer your phone,” he says to me as I’m getting out of my car.

“The kid,” I say. “My nights are hers.”

“Is that an apology?” Gino checks his watch. I head to the door and insert my company issued key.

“I’m here and I’m on time. Any special instructions this morning?” As I flip the master switch, the overhead lights buzz and then flicker before coming on. Gino trails behind me toward the kitchen.

“I gotta open the safe for you. We changed the codes last week. You don’t know them and only Reggie needs to have them.”

“Well don’t mind me,” I say. “I got a lot of prep to do before we open up. What time is my help getting here?” I survey the shelf of canned vegetables and immediately notice that the banana peppers are missing.

When the shift ends, Trevor, the new guy we hired over from Jimmy John’s, takes his place behind the food counter, and Gino takes my place at the register. My drawer balanced when I counted it down and I dropped one deposit into the safe before removing my hair net and clocking out. Three hours of overtime. Combined with the eleven hours of overtime last week, I’m looking at a decent payday tomorrow, thank God. It’s enough to get me caught up on rent and daycare. Should be enough left over to pay off that Walmart credit card I ran up buying Christmas for Lizzie and my brother’s three kids. That bastard was gonna work it off by replacing the battery in my car and charging the freon so I wouldn’t have to spend another damn summer sweating like a rat in a wool sock, but of course he took off. Haven’t heard from him since the middle of January, when he told me he got hooked up with some day labor company that had work for him on the West Coast. Hauling. Heavy equipment. Hauling heavy equipment. Whatever it was, if it ever was anything, took him clear across the country to Arizona. He sent a postcard. Once. Until then, I’d always thought the Hoover Dam was some place in Michigan.

So my AC still isn't working. When I start the car, I pause and look into the rearview at my eyes, mascara smudged, at my lips, chapped and pale. I wipe the sweat from my brow and try to think of things I could do for myself with an hour to spare before I have to pick up Lizzie. There's the pizza place near the daycare with a 2-4-1 beer special until 5:00. There's a newfangled waxing parlor that's offering a deal on eyebrow and chin waxes, both free if I get my legs done first. As I drive toward the daycare, I pass a souped-up Cadillac with magnetic signs on its doors advertising some type of herbal remedy for gout. It makes me want a steak, premium cut, medium rare, the kind I wouldn't dare think of ordering at a restaurant unless it was on someone else's dime, and no one has picked up the tab for me since that Match.com nightmare with the guy who talked only about his pot belly pigs. All thirteen of them. My brother had told me I was being too picky. Maybe I was.

Boiled peanuts. That's it. The gas station next to the daycare sells them by the styrofoam cupful. It only takes me five minutes, and, to my surprise, I see Angela at the fountain drink machine when I walk in.

"Shift change," she says. "Just pulled a double." She opens her purse and removes a roll of twenties. "I got you," she adds and takes my cup of boiled peanuts, puts it on the counter.

So this is how it goes, I think. You become an LPN and suddenly you "got" people. But she doesn't get me, and I certainly don't need her to. Besides, I don't like the way it makes me feel, the way Angela looks at me when she says goodbye before getting into her new Corolla, the way she doesn't look back at me before she pulls out into traffic.

At the daycare, I sit alone in my car before signing Lizzie out for the day and I mentally go through the schedule for the evening. A quick stop at ABC Liquors for some Peach Schnapps, Mac and Cheese for dinner, walk the dog, Lizzie bath, Lizzie books, Lizzie bed. Tonight, I'm going to surf the web for some online college programs. I'm thinking marketing or bookkeeping, teaching, like toddler age maybe. Shapes, numbers, colors, how to buckle and tie and snap things, how to climb a set of monkey bars without falling.

I eat my peanuts and wash them down with what's left of a bottled water I found in the passenger seat floorboard. I wonder if Reggie is actually hurt or if this is like that time he called in for three days after doing mushrooms and lost his truck, not that Gino would do anything about it.

Reggie got promoted after that even though I was the one who covered his shifts when he was gone.

Miss Nancy greets me at the door when I walk in to grab Lizzie. “She refused to take a nap, and she got bit today. Twice.” Lizzie runs into my arms when I kneel down in front of her. “But she sang her alphabet song like such a big girl. I can tell you are working on it at home with her.”

“That’s my smart girl,” I say. “Maybe we can get some ice cream on the way home.” Lizzie is still beaming as I buckle her into her car seat, a smile as wideset and crooked as her father’s. As we ease out of the parking lot, my daughter kicks my elbow. “We will be there soon,” I say.

“Sooooonnn,” she echoes. “Like a cow says mooooo.”

“That’s right sweetheart, just like that.”

She giggles and then grows quiet. I turn on the radio and hear the weatherman talking about windmills, or rather, how no one talks about windmills anymore. He talks about an abandoned windmill in Norfolk, wherever that is. He calls the windmill a “her.”



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