**Confessions of a Diner Employee**

I don’t like wiping tables. I hate the unknown smears that remain stubbornly stuck to the surfaces, the rags that are so tattered that there’s no way they’re ever properly clean, and the pruning that shrivels my already nail-bitten fingertips. When I’ve come home with my hands scuffed and reddened, my mother has tried to wrap my fingers in bandages or plastic, but my teeth find a way to worry at the skin around their edges nevertheless.

But hunched over booths, my manager isn’t shrieking at me, her bulging neck veins protruding far too close to my cheeks. I’m not sequestered alone in the back room with the stacks of canned peaches and overstuffed bags of flour. And the longer I’m making soapy circles on the abandoned tables, the longer I can watch the girl at the counter.

Marisa always manages to make every customer smile, even the persnickety old coots who order just black coffee and toast and then sail out the door. Her always-manicured nails dance across the cash register like it’s a piano, her pealing laughter providing a backtrack to this symphony. Her wild curls frame her soft face like a halo. I absently finger my own snarled mane – I’ve forgotten to comb it again this morning. My mother would have a fit, but I was gone before she woke up today.

Our manager’s back. She’s screaming again, but I think my brain has re-programmed itself to drown out sounds in that wavelength. Shoulders hunched, I scurry towards the back room to prepare for whatever other mindless task the boss has conceived of. Though I don’t look at her, I can feel Marisa watching me go.

Marisa always has friends popping in to visit during her shifts. Their conversations always drench the diner with such a warm and lively glow that even our manager forgets to scold. Though I try to shake the memory away, an image blossoms of one of them taking her hand as her shift was ending, tugging her past the tinny clink of the bell over the door. I had been emptying the garbages out back when I saw them pressed up against the wall together. The headlights of her truck provided the spotlight for their double act, moving together to music that only they could hear. I had shut the door quickly, silently hoping the slam of the screen might startle them apart.

Now, sitting atop a can of peaches, I let my fingers brush against my lips. I imagine myself in the alleyway pressed against Marisa, instead of driving home alone in the night to the porchlight my mother’s left on for me. I whisper the name to myself, a soft prayer, before shame makes me double over like a knife to my gut.