

# *Cards*

I was 28 when my dad told me I was a man and that that meant I had to start working like he did. I asked him why 28 why not older and he started to yell so I said yes and went to bed. My bedroom was above my parents' and at night if I lay real still and didn't move the sheets I could hear them talk and it would scare me. Sometimes I couldn't understand them but I could hear the sounds like a dog barks. If their barks were angry I would cover my ears with the sheets and try not to listen but I always ended up listening. That night they were barking angry. I hoped they weren't talking about me but I think they were.

In the morning my mom woke me up earlier than normal and told me I had to shower. But I never had to shower I said. She turned on the water for me and told me to get in and it was so hot I almost cried. Then she laid out my dad's clothes for me and told me I had to look nice because people would see me. People always see me I said. But she said this was different. She made me eggs and coffee like my dad ate and I pretended to drink the coffee but it tasted like burned dirt and it made me want to vomit. I tried to pour the coffee on the floor so that some of it would be gone but dad caught me and yelled at me and told me to control myself. Mom said dad would take me to work after we finished drinking the coffee and she said she hoped I had fun at work but I knew dad never had fun at work and when he came home he was madder than he was when he left. She gave me a hug and dad finished his coffee and went outside and got into the car. I loved the car and I always tried to roll my window down so I could stick my head out to see if there were any people I knew

driving beside us but dad would shut the window and tell me to control myself. We pulled up outside of a big tower with a bell and we got out and the air was cold and my breath smoked. I tilted my head up and breathed smoke again and again until my dad saw me and told me to control myself. But it was the first smoke day of the year and I wanted to blow it.

We walked into the big building with the bell and met a round man in a pink shirt that was sweaty even though it was a smoke day outside. Dad told him my name and said that I was here to work in dining services and I didn't know what that meant. I thought that I should've been able to pick my own job. But dad was always mad at his job so maybe his dad picked his for him too. The round man's name was Al and that was short for Alfred and he was my boss. I wasn't scared of him so maybe he wasn't my boss. I tried not to ask him questions. Dad shook my hand like he did to other dads at church and told me to control myself and that he would pick me up in front of the bell building at the end of the day. I wanted to cry but I shook his hand as hard as I could and told him I hoped he had fun at work. I thought it was a silly thing to have said.

Al told me to follow him and we went outside into the smoke air and I tried my hardest not to blow smoke but I did once while he wasn't looking. It was the first smoke day of the year. I followed him into a big brick building and down a small staircase and he asked me where I lived and if I had worked before and did I go to school and I didn't know the answers so I just said I don't know and yes. But maybe that was lying and I shouldn't have done that but he talked fast and I needed more time to think if I did work or go to school and what street I lived on.

He led me to the place where the students eat and I knew that it was because they had a big salad bar like Golden Corral and I loved Golden Corral so the students must have been happy. I hoped that I would get to eat at the salad bar but Al said no eating the food. But while Al was in the bathroom I took a crouton and he didn't know but I thought he could smell it on me after. Al explained my job and it seemed easy and I wondered why dad was mad when he came home if work was easy like Al said it was. When students came I would ask them for their card though sometimes they would give it to me if I didn't ask them and I would swipe it in a little black machine. If the machine said OK I let them in and if it said Invalid I told them they couldn't eat. Once I let a girl eat when it said Invalid because she smiled at me and always asked me if I was having a nice day. I would say work was easy so yes it was a nice day. I always forgot to ask her if her day was nice but after I would remember that school was hard so her days must not be so nice.

My first day was not so easy as the rest and I wasn't used to so many people seeing me and I was glad mom gave me dad's clothes because my other ones didn't seem so nice anymore. People would sometimes ask me how I was and if I was new and where was the other swiper and I sometimes smiled and didn't answer or I answered. One boy I asked what a swiper was and he said it should have been in my job description but I didn't know what that meant so I smiled at him and he smiled back.

Every day I would work for breakfast and lunch then write down how many hours I was there in a notebook next to the card machine. My dad would pick me up in front of the bell tower and I would wait for him blowing smoke until I saw his car

and I would stop so he wouldn't tell me to control myself. He would ask me how work was sometimes but other times he wouldn't talk and he smelled strange and I wanted to get home faster. He sometimes hit the curbs when he turned and when he smelled strange he would hit the curbs more. In front of the bell tower I always hoped he would smell normal.

I saw the same students every day at work and they started to learn my name even though I didn't learn theirs. But it was easier for them because they had to learn one and I had to learn lots more. One girl with a pretty smile learned my name first and I thought she looked awfully happy for a student that didn't have nice days. When she said my name I always smiled and looked down and hoped the machine would say OK. But it always would and I would look back up at her and be mad that I couldn't stop smiling. Once when I gave her back her card after it said OK her fingers touched mine and I smiled then coughed so that she wouldn't see me smiling. When she walked away I heard someone call Jessica and she smiled and ran to them so then I knew her name was Jessica.

Jessica came in with two friends usually one boy and one girl. The other girl had not so pretty a smile as Jessica and sometimes I thought she looked more like a boy. The real boy was big much bigger than me or my dad and he never smiled like Jessica did. Jessica. I didn't like him very much but I didn't know why.

Since I knew her name I thought I should say it to her so she would know I knew it. And after the machine said OK one time I said have a nice lunch Jessica and she laughed sweeter than my mom did and said she was glad I knew her name. And then I smiled too much again so I coughed and took the next card. Jessica.

Every day she would come in and every day I would say have a nice lunch Jessica and every time she would smile but the boy she was with began to frown at me when I did this and I didn't know why. So I started saying enjoy your lunch Jessica instead but he still frowned and I was very confused.

I wanted her hand to touch mine again but it never happened and every time she came through I would bite my cheek hard and try not to grab her hand but it looked soft even softer than my mom's. I wanted to grab it. Jessica. I didn't know what I wanted to do after I grabbed it but I wanted to anyways.

I started to hate everything but work because Jessica was nowhere but work and her hands were there too and I couldn't grab them but at least I could see them. And I didn't mind the boy frowning at me because I was happy to see Jessica smiling. I saw her when I slept and I learned how to write her name so I wrote it over and over in the notebook that I used to show how long I worked. Jessica Jessica Jessica all across the page and it was beautiful and I would write it page after page after page. Jessica Jessica Jessica.

My days were always the happy same at work until one morning after I heard my parents barking mad beneath me my mom and dad both went to take me to work. My mom didn't make me breakfast that morning so I ate chips I found in the pantry. They didn't talk to me either and I was too scared to ask them why. My dad grabbed me by the shoulder hard when we had to leave and picked me up out of my chair. It hurt so I yelled then he pushed me into the table and told me to control myself then he called me a name I didn't know and slammed the door leaving. My

mom told me to go to the car. I didn't try to roll down the window in the car because they both looked like they wanted to hit me.

We parked in front of the bell building and got out and it was a smoke day again so I blew it secretly and my parents didn't see. I saw Al come out to the parking lot to meet us which I thought was strange because he was always in his office eating soup at this time. He shook my parents' hands and told them that he was thankful they came. He didn't shake my hand. He led us down to his office and I was confused and I wanted to ask why we were going to his office and why my parents were here but I controlled myself.

When we got to his office I almost screamed because Jessica and two other people were there and I wasn't ready to see her. Jessica. She wasn't smiling like she normally did. She looked like crying and when I said hi Jessica she choked a little bit and looked at me like a kicked dog and the woman next to her grabbed her soft hands. Jessica. Then I heard the door open back up behind us and I saw the boy who always frowned at me walk in. He bumped into me because I was in front of the door then he went and stood in front of Jessica and she was crying and he was frowning at me again. I looked away because I felt scared and nervous and I saw Al's desk and nothing was on it but the notebook I used to show how long I worked. My parents and Al were looking at it so I leaned closer to see and I read my words Jessica Jessica Jessica all across the page and my mom was crying like Jessica too and Al said that this was the problem and that this was unacceptable. My dad turned around and looked like he wanted to spit at me. I spun and everyone was looking at me now including Jessica and the men were frowning and the women were crying and now

Jessica was holding the notebook and looking scared and reading Jessica Jessica Jessica Jessica. Al asked me to explain the notebook and I didn't know what to say and I saw Jessica's hands moving across the Jessicas I wrote and they looked so soft and the boy with her was frowning horribly and I bit my cheek but I felt I couldn't control myself anymore and I wanted to grab them horribly so I did. I ran to her and grabbed her hands off of the notebook and squeezed them tightly and yelled Jessica and I would never let go I thought. Jessica. They were softer than my mom's and Jessica tried to kick me off but I moved and I didn't let go then I saw the frown move towards me and felt a burn on my right cheek and I fell to the ground and Jessica's soft hands were gone and that was the worst of it. Then I can't say what happened but I remember noise and control yourself and the tile below me and I saw Jessica run sideways out of the office. Jessica.

My dad picked me up and dragged me out of the office and I heard Al yelling behind me and my mom was crying loud. We got outside and walked towards the car. It was a smoke day outside and maybe the last one of the year so I had to blow it. I blew and blew and tried to spell Jessica with the smoke but my dad saw me and slapped me and told me to control myself but I didn't want to. I kept blowing. It might have been the last smoke day of the year.