

In the Gloaming

Rain pelted the ants, sizzling on the black pavement. It drooled into their caverns, flooding their sandy solitude. Drenched and desperate they scurried, ignorant of the setting sun. The horizon buried itself beneath the murky clouds.

The clock hanging above the register read 9:47: thirteen minutes to close. Her apron, dirty with ice cream smears, hot fudge, and strawberry juice, clung to her sticky body. Her hands testified to the dozens of sundaes she'd made that day, many leaving caramel residue under her fingernails.

Although the day's heat had lured many customers toward a frozen treat, the darkening sky drove them back to their cars. There came a break in the storm of people while the true storm burgeoned, snapping the spindly spines of marigolds and flinging forgotten napkins into the wind. The worsening weather allowed her to begin the list of closing duties early.

She flicked machines to stand-by and placed the few leftover hot dogs in the fridge. She wiped down countertops, sending Oreo crumbs and sprinkles cascading to the floor. She restocked for tomorrow, feeding gallons of gurgling cream to the whirring metal beast.

It was now 9:58: two minutes to close. The small sliding window hadn't been opened since the last customer two hours ago. Surely it was ok to lock up, she thought, sliding the metal peg into its place and bolting the window shut. She couldn't wait to get home and relax.

And then she saw him.

It wasn't a flickering pair of headlights or the clunk of footsteps that caused her to turn around. It was the brewing sensation that someone was watching. Someone was here.

Four, three, two, one

10:00: closed.

He stood, staring through the window with dark, emotionless eyes, waiting. It was 10 o'clock. The shop was closed: the windows bolted, the machines sanitized, the building quiet.

She was exhausted, spent from today's eight hour shift, eager to return home and sleep. But he had seen her and there was no escape.

Stuffing her indignation, she unlatched the window and opened it with a forced smile.

"Hi, there! How can I serve you today?"

"A ham and cheese sandwich, an order of fries, and a large root beer. Combo."

"Please..." he added with a stutter.

"Would you like pic—"

"Just onions... please," he interrupted. "With provolone, please."

He paid in wadded cash. She watched as he made his way to the pick-up window without hesitation. This man seemed familiar: his meek voice, his graying tousled hair, his shaking fingers, his knowledge of the menu. But she couldn't remember ever seeing him before.

She plugged the oven back in and made his sandwich as she waited for it to reheat. Outside she could hear the raindrops on the tin roof and the wind beginning to pick up again, banging the shutters against the exterior of the shop.

She handed him his steaming paper bag of fries and a sandwich. He nodded thank you and turned to leave. She expected him to tuck his food inside his coat, shield it from the worsening storm, and sprint to his car. Yet he ambled toward the picnic table and sat down as if unaware of the pouring rain. There was no car in sight.

Soon his hair clung to the side of his face and his beige overcoat was soaked. The pile of half-eaten fries bobbed in a small pool of water. His arm rested on the pile of napkins growing sodden and wind-whipped. But there he sat - immobile.

One, two, three, four.

10:15.

Part of him felt the rain but he was glad of it. He didn't want to be here yet he knew how much this spot meant to her. She'd always ask for a root beer float but with chocolate soft serve instead of vanilla. His eyes burned as he thought of it. Soon tears were streaming down his

face, lost in the puddles of rain. She would be angry to see him sitting alone at this table in the downpour, the wind stinging his already red eyes.

He felt bad he was keeping the young girl. He could tell she was watching him, waiting for him to get up and leave. What did she know of loss? The feeling of being unmoored, detached like the paper straw that was caught in a sudden gust. He chastised himself for spending money on himself but knew she would want him to on his birthday.

The girl tapped her feet, staring at him, waiting for the man. She felt uncomfortable shutting the lights off and leaving him there alone. But she ached for a steaming cup of tea and her bed. He looked up and caught the her eyes. She turned away but he knew she must think him odd. He was odd. He wasn't himself anymore and would never be again he knew, feeling the rootbeer prickle down his throat.