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Mandy made smiley faces out of ketchup and mustard on the buns when she made sandwiches at Burger Barn. She had a high, squeaky voice and was pretty in a clean kind of way, but she was married. Most of them were, with kids. I was one of only three males that worked there. We were late teens; most of the women were older except a couple of girls who were seniors in high school.

The other two guys were meth freaks. Most of us smoked pot. Mandy and a couple of the older ones didn't, but everyone but her knew we did it.

My sister got me the job. She was a shift manager. She would light a pipe in the cooler and take a couple hits in the cold air where the smell of the smoke didn't spread. There was only enough room for one or two people in there at a time, so she'd hand the pipe off to somebody and come out to work, then the next person would go in.

Once, Mandy walked in on her.

"It smells funny in here," she said to my sister, who was hiding the pipe behind her back and trying not to exhale any of the mouthful of smoke she was choking on. "Kind of woody. Like someone's been burning evergreen needles or something."

My sister shrugged and Mandy got the pickles she'd come for, smiled and left.

I never imagined anyone could be so naive. But Mandy was sweet. It made us feel guilty to deceive her, sort of like hiding treats from a puppy.

"I'd go out with your brother if I wasn't married," she told my sister, once. She thought I was having trouble finding the right girl, which was true, I suppose. A couple of the girls who worked there were married and still went out. At the time, I was going out with two high school girls who worked there, though I was only sleeping with one of them. They read *Goosebumps* books and listened to shitty music. For all her naiveté, Mandy was more intelligent and more interesting to be around than either of them. They were forever trying to set me up with ugly friends. I went out with these girls, spending the evenings talking about Camus, Beckett's plays and Mandy.

Mandy talked about her husband nonstop. Other than her classes at the Baptist college, he was the only life she had. She talked about how he separated the kitchen towels from the bathroom towels when he did laundry, how he wouldn't wash underwear with anything else. She told my sister, once, that he wouldn't go down on her because he thought it was gross.

"He won't let me do him, either," she said. "I don't mind so much him not doing me. I'm not really into that so much."

I believed in my heart of hearts that given five minutes, I could change Mandy's opinion on this subject. I flirted with her nonstop, edging as close as I dared to outright offers to demonstrate, but I

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knew that if I went to far, that would be it. She wouldn't talk to me anymore, she might even quit.

I made her blush frequently, complimenting her in every way I could think of. It made me feel good to compliment her. It seemed somehow cleaner than flirting with the other girls. With them, it was a means to an end. With Mandy, it was like praising a work of art, or complimenting a child. The other girls watched and smirked.

"You're just jacking off," one girl said. "You're not going to get anywhere with her."

"Yeah," I said. "What are you doing after work?"

Her name was Karen or Beth or something like that. She was blond, five feet and some change tall, with a thick neck and a pretty face. I usually liked women like that, stout like Amazons. She was the exact opposite of Mandy.

I went over to her place, and she made me watch *Legends of the Fall*, fast-forwarding through all the parts she didn't like, so that I had no idea what the movie was about.

"Watch this," she said, slowing it down as a character walked across a field or stood in a doorway.

I tried to kiss her, but she pushed me away, laughing.

"Watch this," and Brad Pitt would stare woodenly at something.

"I'm leaving if you keep this up," I said.

"You like it when Mandy blueballs you," she said.

The movie ended and she put in *Jerry Maguire*. I waited for her to sit back down, tore her clothes off and buried my face between her legs.

"Wait," she said, laughing. "Here comes Cuba."

"I'm having a missile crises of my own," I said, but she had no idea what I was saying.

I kept myself occupied with the high school girls, but it was like masturbation instead of sex; it only kept the itch under control, it didn't fix it. I decided that flattery wasn't working. The way to get to Mandy was to show her some of the things her crazy husband glossed over. Though I wanted to start with cunnilingus, I decided to start a little safer.

Mandy was going to college, even if it was a Baptist college, to study English. She wanted to teach. Her husband had an Associates in business and worked at a bank downtown. I hadn't been to college, but I knew literature.

"What do you like to read?" I asked her.

"William Blake," she said. "I love William Blake."

"He saw angels," I said.

"He did," she said, smiling.

"I see one now, too," I said.

Her smile faltered. I wanted to kick my own ass. I couldn't help it, she was like a dog you just couldn't help petting. I quoted "Tiger, Tiger," and then went back to work in the back. Karen or Beth or whatever her name was was back there working the grill. She didn't look up at me, but I could see her smiling.

"What are you grinning at?" I asked her.

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"Just watching you jack off," she said.

I glared at her for a minute and couldn't think of anything to say. She played with the burgers on the grill for a second, then handed me the spatula. "It's okay," she said. "I like jacking you off." She winked at me and went back up front.

It made me mad and I told myself I wasn't going to see her anymore, but after work, she showed up by my car, begging for a ride home. I took her the long way, stopped in a cemetery on a gravel road in the middle of nowhere and stayed a little while.

When I dropped her off, she reached in to kiss me. I kept my eyes forward so that she got a cheek, then I watched her stumble to the door. I could hear her laughing in the dark. I didn't think about it, just turned around and drove home.

The next day I had off, so I stayed home and got high with my room mate, who worked at Burger Barn too. We watched shitty movies and made jokes that seemed hilarious at the time. It was okay for hiding out. It killed the day.

The morning after that, I was grinding meat in the back when Mandy came over. She was nervous looking and her skin was the color of fog on a mountain. I turned the grinder off in mid-patty. I was afraid if I didn't, I might get excited and cut a finger off. Seeing her nervous like that made me feel like a Humbert Humbert at a girl's softball game.

"Bill," she said and paused for a long time. I didn't want to rush her. It would be hard, with her background. I didn't want to make it any harder, so I just smiled at her.

She looked at me and looked all around. Karen or Beth was working, but she was by the grill and couldn't hear, probably. Mandy looked down like she was about to start crying. "I'm sorry," she finally said. "But I can't."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She looked at me, shocked. "You know what I mean," she said.

I shook my head.

"I can't," she said again. "I'm married. I'm sorry."

She gave me a "be brave" smile and went back up front. I watched her thin hips and practically nonexistent ass turn the corner. Karen or Beth saw her and turned, watching Mandy. That's how I knew she was crying. Karen or Beth looked at me and a flush of anger covered her face. She came back to me, stared at me good for a few seconds, then slapped me hard.

"What the fuck?" I said.

She went up front with Mandy. I could see them through the slit in the wall between the front and the back, where we passed orders. Karen or Beth glared at me every few seconds and talked to Mandy. I watched them until the sting left my cheek, then I took off my apron and walked out.

I waited till later in the day to call my sister and apologize for walking out on the job she'd gotten me. I figured she deserved to sleep in; no reason to wake her up on my account.

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