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A Quiet House

by Renee Evans

By midnight on Friday, my boss, Evelyn, had already sent Jessie and Ashley home so it was just her and me working down at the Waffle House during the snowstorm. It had been snowing steadily since eight thirty, when the dinner rush died down, and since then, the weathermen on the radio were asking people to stay at home, avoid travel if they could, so Evelyn—Evie—figured people would stay off the highway and we'd be pretty slow. She kept me on because, even though she'd never let it slip, I'm just about the only girl on our shift she can stand working with. I keep my mouth shut and my apron clean. Evie's a real particular type of woman: she's got this ratty, frizzy yellow ponytail and this puckered, scowling mouth, and some of the shrewdest little eyes I've ever seen—not a very pretty gal, if you catch my drift—and *skinny*. Skinny like an anorexic, but she's not like that. There's something else to her that I still haven't been able to put my finger on, and it's why I can stand to work with her too. But she likes things the way she likes them and not any other way. So we'd already spent a good portion of our evening together, me scraping gum from under the tables, Evie pacing back and forth between the fridge and the walk-in—neither of us talking—and listening to the weatherman predict doom and gloom, when I saw a pair of headlights cut through the snow to swing into the parking lot and stop outside the door. And the boy—the man—who got out of the car once it was turned off, well, it only took one look at the guy to know he would be nothing but trouble.

Now, I've only been working here for a few months, but in that time, I've seen some stuff to make you wonder. Being out here on the highway, just at the outskirts of town, we get all types. Early in the night, it's truckers mostly, who are usually tired and sad, looking for someone to talk to, maybe share a cup of coffee with. And later on, after the bars have closed down, we get drunk college kids who will hopefully realize someday just how rude it is to be obnoxious and a lousy tipper at the same time. But once in a while we'll get a real character.

I remember one time, some mess came in all dolled up in these platform heels and mini-mini skirt, cheap fur coat, dark glossy (obviously a wig) hair, the works. I went over to see if I could take an order, and I noticed the girl had bloody knuckles. I looked at her face, and both eyes were black and blue with bruises. I didn't know what to do so I ran and got Evie.

She pulled her fingertip out of her mouth—she's always chewing on what's left of her cuticles; it's disgusting—and came storming over to the table. She put her bony hands on her thin little hips and said, "Excuse me, miss," real stern and angry. But Evie didn't get a chance to continue.

"Are you my gorilla?" I swear that's what it sounded like the lady said.

And Evie just sort of stood there, stunned, while the woman in the bad wig looked Evie up and down. She pushed the fake hair out of her eyes and sat up straighter. That's when I saw the chest hair. Our Miss Mess was a man.

“No,” he said. “*She* was beautiful. She was *beautiful!*”

It must have struck something inside Evie—and this is another reason I think she’s skinny, being so ugly and all—because she grabbed that guy by the furry arm of his coat and lifted his ass right off the seat. She dragged him while he teetered on his heels all the way to the door, and he kept trying to talk to her: “Always be beautiful, she told me.”

“I’m sure,” was all Evie said as she shoved him into the foyer then out onto the parking lot, where the evening was chilly and wet.

He pounded once on the window with his fists and watched Evie come back inside. He screamed, “They hacked her to pieces!” Then he hobbled away.

Evie had slouched into one of the booths near the doorway and got this sort of empty look on her face. When I asked if she was okay she said she had just over exerted herself and needed a Diet Coke. She drank it down and within ten minutes was back up, giving orders, scaring the wits out of Jessie and Ashley. She never said anything about it. It was the only time I’d seen her get riled by a customer.

Normally, she can dish out the banter with the rest of them. I think truckers like that she’s a no-nonsense kind of woman and tip her well for it. And college kids probably feel comforted by the fact that they’re not where she is and that she can tell them when they’ve had enough and need to get the hell on home. But ever since the beautiful gorilla incident, I’d come to realize that she may be able to dish it out, but she doesn’t take it in very well. Don’t get me wrong, she’ll be nice in the way an assistant manager is supposed to be nice, but she’s got that particular way about her, and when people don’t treat her the way she expects, she can get pretty nasty, even if it’s not a direct attack.

So when this trouble man walked in on the night of the snowstorm, I sat up in my booth and watched Evie to see what she would do. Just to look at the guy was like an event. He was huge. He stomped the snow off his boots in the vestibule before he stepped into the restaurant proper. He wore a big blue puffy coat and took up so much space his coat rubbed up against the metal door frame and made a sick, high-pitched noise. He was almost as tall as the doorway. His head, which seemed to meet the top of his shoulder at the jaw, was shaved, and it looked even eerier under the big globes of greenish light hanging around the restaurant. His eyes were dark and bloodshot. He looked tired, but I could tell he had a certain intensity about him.

Evie must have noticed, too, because she stopped slouching, put her hands on her hips and squeezed her waist while she waited for him to unbundle.

He shrugged off his coat before draping it across the stool next to his. The floor was slippery and wet, and his boots were these big clunky things, but I swear, he was *graceful*. I mean he was a big guy, and he sat up straight on the bar stool, not slumped over, no gut or man-boobs to rest like you see on so many truckers.

I could tell right away that Evie was in one of her moods because she got this little twitch in her right eyebrow and said, “My, my. You some sort of sports player or something?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “You some sort of waitress or something?”

Evie scowled and I thought, *oh God*.

“I’m just giving you a hard time.” He smiled. “My name’s Nelson Schmitt. You may have heard of me.” (I had not.) “I play football up at State. Defensive end.”

Evie picked up a rag and wiped the counter in front of Nelson. “I don’t watch football. Never did make any sense to me. Couldn’t keep my eye on the ball.” She shook her head. “Not enough happening fast enough, you know?”

And now that I think of it, that’s pretty much what Evie was like: always on the move. She was a fidgeter; it drove everyone crazy, the way she was always into everything. She went and went and went and didn’t seem to stop. She took “Diet Coke breaks,” she called them, and that was the only time she was ever still.

Nelson nodded in response to Evie’s question about football, though I don’t think it was in agreement.

“You want some coffee? I can brew some fresh,” she said, looking at me, which meant I was to drop what I had been doing and start a new pot of coffee. I put down my scraping knife and got up to go join Evie behind the counter.

“Sure, I’ll take a cup of coffee. And a cup of hot cocoa if you’ve got it.”

I emptied the old filter pack from the machine and tore open a new one. I pushed the start button and out of the corner of my eye, I watched Nelson watch Evie while she got his mugs and saucers. He sized her up, and really, there was no comparison. He was at least two of her, if not three. I bet he could have circled both her wrists with his one hand and have room left over for a skinned rabbit. He looked like one of those people who use steroids. You don’t mess with those people. Remember that wrestler a while back who went crazy and killed his family and then himself? This guy was big like that. Bigger.

Evie tossed her ponytail, which would have been a sweet gesture on anyone else, but Evie...well, she’s just not that pretty. I’m pretty sure I caught the kid shiver and look away from her after she did that.

“You warm enough? Do we need to turn up the heat?” I asked, hoping, on Evie’s part, that he hadn’t just shuddered with disgust.

“No, I’m fine.”

I went back to my gum scraping, this time down the counter along his right side.

“So what are you draggin yourself through this godawful snow for, anyway?”

He looked up from the laminated menu in front of him. “Going down to see my mama for Christmas. She says it breaks her heart she doesn’t get to see me more. In person, that is. I send her tapes of every game.” He smiled and revealed a row of perfectly straight teeth and nodded in gratitude at the cup of hot cocoa Evie set in front of him.

She had added whipped cream without asking if he wanted any, something she normally didn’t do. She had a tirade ready to go for anyone who asked for whipped cream, all about how it’s nothing but plastic and nobody should be eating

that stuff anyway.

“She’s not well enough to travel,” Nelson said, going on again about his mother. “Otherwise, she’d come to more of my games. She takes good care of me, though.”

Evie poured a mug of coffee for Nelson and said, “I see.” She replaced the coffee pot and wiped her hands on her apron. “You gonna sing your mother’s praises, or are you gonna order something, Football?”

He looked at her like he had something snippy to say, but he said: “I’ll have the All-Star, just like it looks here in the picture.”

She plucked the menu out of his hand as if she needed to double-check what the photo looked like, as if she didn’t have the menu memorized forward and backward.

“Toast, grits, eggs, sausage and waffle. How do you want your eggs?”

“Just like it shows there in the picture,” he said.

I flipped a piece of hardened gum off the counter and it bounced off Nelson’s thigh. I didn’t think he would be sensitive enough to feel it, but he flinched. “Excuse me,” I said.

“Nettie, quit screwing around and get back here on the grill. Order in. Just like the picture.” Evie looked at me. I knew she didn’t like her authority being challenged, especially by some college kid who, as she would probably put it, “had no idea what real life was like,” and this guy was definitely challenging her. “Just like in the picture,” she repeated. She turned to Nelson and said, “It’s a corporate secret that we use pictures on the menus to help the drunks order so they can sober up before they go home.”

As far as I know, that’s not really true, but I just closed the waffle iron and didn’t say anything. Neither did he.

“And sometimes these drunks, they come in stinkin to high heaven,” Evie continued, “all hopped up on who knows what, and they don’t even know what they want, or can’t say it. Then I just give ‘em ham and grits. Country ham. None of that city stuff. And they eat it every time.” She tilted her head sideways until her neck popped once and stood there for a couple more seconds, waiting for him to reply.

I could tell she was getting worked up, in the slow way she does, and it made me nervous. When we get real busy I get nervous and make a mess of food on the line. I almost burned the kid’s sausage. But I caught it in time and slipped it over to a cooler spot on the grill, next to the eggs.

“And when that doesn’t work, I just throw ‘em out.”

“Mm.” He was in the middle of sipping his coffee when he said this and had to set the cup down and finish swallowing. “And how does that work?”

She tossed her ponytail. “Grab ‘em by the collar, sleeve, ear, whatever, and drag

their sorry asses to the door.”

“Really? Because I’m in the business of pushing and chucking people and, no offense, but you don’t seem like you’d be big enough to do much damage.”

Evie popped two slices of white toast into the toaster then stirred the grits. It was getting to where she had to work with her back to the guy. “Oh, trust me. I can do plenty of damage when I need to. And I didn’t always used to be this size.” She looked at me real quick and nodded before she pulled his waffle from the iron and plated the rest. She had a look of concentration about her, like she was trying not to smell something that stank.

“And what size do you think you used to be?” He spread all his butter over the waffle then filled each square with syrup—evenly, like in an ice cube tray.

“I know I’m skinny now, but I used to be close to your size,” she said. (I find this hard to believe, because honestly, she’s nothing but sticks and skin and meanness.) “Well, maybe not quite your size, but I got to be pretty big.” She looked at me after this I’m kind of a big girl myself, what with these hips and all, and at first I thought she was going to try to be sensitive about weight on account of me—a pretty silly idea, to be sure—but instead she had this look like she was telling him something she didn’t even want me to hear. Now, why on earth on that particular night she’d tell secrets to a perfect stranger instead of someone who knows her and puts up with her, I’ll never know.

As she handed him his toast, he asked, “How could you have ever been big?”

“When I started working here. Move your elbow so I can get that spill. But, no. When I started here, I ballooned up like you would not believe. Of course I’d always been kind of hefty to begin with. I was never Miss Suzy-popular with a million boyfriends or anything.” (No surprise there.) “Being big was just something I’d accepted, fine. But working here, didn’t take long.”

“I’ve been big my whole life, too.” He sipped his coffee and looked out the window. “And kids. You know how they are.”

I was getting ready to put down my grill scraper and join the conversation, because I could tell you some stories, but Evie jumped in ahead of me.

“Sure,” she said. And it looked like she was going to go on and say something else, but this time, *he cut her off*.

“You’re different, fat, skinny, slow, smart, whatever, they make fun of you. It didn’t matter. So, of course I got it.” He stopped for a second to shove a quarter of his waffle in his mouth. Didn’t even bother to chew it all the way before he kept talking, which just turned my stomach. “Trouble was, I didn’t know how to handle it. I got angry, got violent.”

This was supposed to be the time of night when I was to start on the floors, but it sounded like the gossip was about to get good, so I waited to go get the mop water from out in the hallway. I just stood there real still and listened.

“But my mama, now that’s a different story,” he said. “She wouldn’t have any of it. So she talked to me, asked what was wrong.” He dragged some of his sausage through the egg yolk on his plate then topped that off with another sip of hot

cocoa. “Finally, I broke down and told her, you know, how they’d been making fun. She looked at me and said, son, you got two choices. Either accept who you are and who they are, or work to change yourself for the better.”

“That’s right,” Evie said.

She may have been getting excited by what he had to say, but it didn’t sound like anything I hadn’t heard before, so I grabbed the broom and started sweeping, and this time, I only half-listened to what he had to say.

“So I started working out.” Started building lean muscle, eating right. I joined football, where it was good to be strong and heavy. And even better if you were stronger and heavier. Then you could play defense.

I could tell Evie was watching him as he ate. She had to have been just as disgusted as I was. He never stopped talking with his mouth full, and the way his jaws kept pumping and pumping, how his muscles popped out and flexed on his face when he chewed, he looked like some kind of animal right off the farm.

Evie must have been thinking along the same lines because she said, “So, you look like—that—naturally?”

“Well, I work out. I can’t be giving away the tricks of the trade, you know. I’ve had scouts after me since I was in junior high.”

Right then was when I knew it: steroids. I had been right. He probably popped pills like they were Tic-Tacs or something. He didn’t drink coffee, he drank *protein shakes*, snacked on footballs and did push-ups in his sleep. I wanted to tell Evie to back off, because this guy was not one to be messed with.

But I could hear her trying to argue back to me—by that time I pretty much knew what would come out of her mouth—saying he was just a little kid who had gone crying to his mommy and his mommy had told him to man up and take charge, so that’s what he had done: he’d gotten himself under control. She’d say he knew what all that muscle and weight and bone could do in the right combinations; he knew what he was capable of, and he’d learned to keep it under control.

“Well,” she said.

“What about you?” He sopped up some grits with a piece of toast then took a bite. “What’s your *success story*? Jenny Craig?”

Evie picked up her rag and wiped down the counter top again. “You ever had to wait tables before?”

He shook his head.

She nodded in my direction. “We cook, we clean, we serve, we put up with a lot of bullshit—excuse my language—but it’s a lot of work for not a lot of peanuts.” (This much is true, I’ll tell you that.) “I wanted someone to say, ‘Hey, Evie, you do a bang-up job,’ and the only way to get that kind of recognition here is to get promoted.” I hadn’t really thought of it that way before. It’s usually the tips that keep me going. She cleared a few of the kid’s empty plates as he finished his waffle. “You ever seen a fat assistant manager?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” he said, after he swallowed.

I know I have, and they’re just as mean and ugly as the skinny ones.

“They think you’re dumb,” she said, “even when you can serve circles around everybody else.” (Now I don’t know about you, but it has been my experience that neither kind of assistant manager actually does much of anything of value.) “And a fat assistant manager is just one step away from a fat manager, and that’s just unprofessional.” She refilled his coffee cup then cleared his dishes into the sink, ran hot water over them, and left them there—for me, no doubt. “I was tired of it. I started cutting back what I ate. I started losing. The weight kept coming. Then I started walking around the parking lot on my break.” She looked at me, but I kept sweeping and pretended to not hear. “I picked up running, and somewhere in there, I stopped eating late, and then I stopped eating sugar and sweets.”

“Uh-huh.”

She sighed. “I counted calories, of course, and then I stopped eating dinner altogether and started getting up early to run and work out.” She looked at me again and said, “Nettie, why don’t you go fill the mop bucket?”

I propped the broom handle against the door and hurried out to the bathroom hallway. Through the door, I heard him say, “Sounds like training camp,” before I pushed the knob for sanitizer and turned on the noisy hot water faucet. I know it was wrong of me to sit in on gossip and the unhappiness of others. And I know that Evie and I are supposed to have some sort of tolerance for one another because we can both work in the kind of quiet the other needs and provides. But I thought she was plain out of line. Excuse me for saying, but she was a bitch just because she’d been fat? Made no kind of sense to me. I’d always figured she was such a grump because she was *hungry*. I thought back and realized I’d never seen her eat not one bite in the few months I’d been there, and we’d worked doubles. Crazy.

And this Nelson kid. He didn’t know who he’d pitted himself up against.

When I pushed the mop bucket out into the restaurant, I could smell a slab of ham sizzling from on the grill. I put out the wet floor sign and looked around for another customer, but it was still just the kid and Evie, who was back at the stove, stirring more grits. A drinker’s special. I wondered if he’d ordered it or if she had insisted in that pushy way she does and that no one can say no to. I rinsed my mop and moved to another section of the floor.

Evie scooped a serving of grits onto a plate, forked the ham next to it, then sighed real big. She turned around and said, “Listen, what’s your name again, Football?”

“Nelson.”

“Nelson. I’ve been thinking about what you said about training camp. You talked about pushing yourself until you all got ill and all that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“When I said I pushed myself ever since, I think I may have meant a different kind of pushing.”

My God, I thought, what had I missed?

Evie continued. "I think what you're pushing to see is what your body can do. What it can do to others, maybe." She spoke slowly now, choosing her words carefully. "But when I say I pushed my body, I mean I pushed to see what I could deny it, what I could do to it."

He looked up, and with his mouth full, "What, like one of those monks?"

"Maybe." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not sure. What I mean is, not only did I stop eating dinner, but I stopped eating lunch, too."

"Yeah, like an anorexic. I've seen that sort of thing in the wrestlers."

"Damnit, Football, you're not listening to me!"

The kid, who had jumped when Evie smacked the counter top with her outburst, put his fork down. I stopped mopping and stood still.

"Fifty-two calories in a grapefruit half in the morning. Thirty calories in a tomato in the afternoon. Water and Diet Coke and concentration. And willpower." Evie was in his face now. She leaned over the counter. She was probably close enough he could smell her nasty breath. Like milk dried up and gone wrong.

"I can burn five-hundred calories in thirty minutes."

"And I could already squat five-hundred pounds in high school. What's it to you?"

Evie looked him in the eyes. He was matching her step for step. But she wouldn't back down, I knew. She kept her eyes on him as she untied the knot from the manager's tie around her neck.

"It's about discipline, Football. You think you know what that is?" She unbuttoned the top three buttons to her blouse. "Hm? Five years, kid. Slop. Serving slop, cleaning slop. Being slop." She pushed her top down, revealing her shoulders, and all I could do was stand there.

"What the hell, lady?" He stood up, but he didn't back away.

"Look!" She thrust her chin at him and leaned forward. Her collarbones stuck out as big as garden hoses draped across her front. The tips at her shoulders nobbed out like knuckles, and worst was how I could count the number of ribs disappearing into her ragged bra: three. Oh, Evie. The kid turned away, but he wouldn't look at me either.

"Look, Football! *This* is what I'm talking about. Think you're hot shit. But you're no better than me. Touch it. Touch it and tell me I'm not better than you."

"I don't think—"

"I said touch it!" She grabbed his meaty paw and laid it on her collarbone. "Feel that, Football?"

He looked down at his hand. We could see her pulse under her clammy yellow

skin. She had all these veins. I'd never seen anyone so thin.

And there she was, so proud of how big her bones were, like a threat inside her skin. Something bigger than me, bigger than her, bigger than him inside.

"My name," he said, and I saw him close his hand around what was left of her shoulder, "is not 'Football.'" Then, I swear to God, he leapt—in one motion—over the counter then landed next to Evie with his hand still on her shoulder.

I think I took a step closer to the swinging gate.

She said, "But do you see—"

"I said my name—" and here he picked up a handful of grits and *smear*ed it all over Evie's mouth, which she clamped shut as she turned her head away from him and the food in his hand (I think back now on all the things I should have done: I should have called the police. I should have grabbed a knife. I should have beaned him with a skillet. But I didn't do any of that.)—"is Nelson. Nelson. Samuel Schmitt." He pushed harder on her mouth until he got her lips separated, until he got grits on her teeth, until he made her lip bleed.

"Nelson. Not 'Football.'" I saw him shift his weight and push down on her shoulder until her knees buckled and she was kneeling there on the floor, which was still messy with dinner filth and always greasy.

I heard a little whimper come out of Evie, but that was it. He was squeezing her collarbone now. I could see his fingertips go pink, then white as he squeezed even harder, and she still wasn't making any noise, which made him push harder and stronger. She bent forward and we could see her spine and ribs. And it was still some kind of insult, because he roared and gave it one final lurch until—there. I heard it snap.

He let go of her broken collarbone. She exhaled and kept her bloody mouth shut.

Nelson stood and looked around. He looked at me, and it was like I realized I was even there. He ran his hands alongside his head and walked through the swinging gate, past me, and into the dining section.

"Hey," I said.

He stopped and spun around. He wobbled a little on the wet floor, but he kept his balance. He dug around in his pocket then pulled out a crumpled wad of cash. Without counting it, he threw it on the counter then grabbed his coat.

"You can't," I said.

He stopped at the door and looked at me, and I still can't figure out what to call that look on his face. It was angry and sad and ashamed and somehow vengeful all at the same time. Nelson walked through one set of doors, then the other, and out into the snow.

I waited for him to get in his car before I ran to lock the door and go check on Evie. I grabbed the phone off the wall and was getting ready to dial when she stopped me.

“Don’t,” she said. “Not yet. Help me up.”

I held the hand of her good arm and slipped my other hand around her waist. She lifted like so much air. She was breathing heavy, and there were still grits stuck to her face and neck and chest.

“Seat,” she said. I walked her out to the dining room and sat her in a booth. When she was settled, she looked at me and said, “Plate.”

I ran and got Nelson’s plate of leftovers. He’d barely eaten any of it. I also grabbed Evie’s counter top rag and sat across from her as she looked at the food in front of her. She stared at it for a while, as if she was trying to decide something, then she lifted a finger, ran it through the grits, and put it in her mouth.

“Go slow,” I said.

She closed her eyes in agreement. While she chewed, I used the rag to clean off her cheeks and chin and chest. She was quiet. She ate steadily.

“You’re a good girl, Nettie.”

“Sure,” I said. And for a while, it was just the two of us sitting there in the quiet of the Waffle House, together.

Renee Evans is a graduate of Southern Illinois University-Carbondale’s MFA program. A Pushcart nominated, her work has appeared in *Roger*, *Fogged Clarity*, *Eastown Fiction*, *Weave Magazine*, and elsewhere.

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