2016

The Red Hat

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Recommended Citation
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Work on Tuesday is slow. There are no customers and only me and Kate waitressing. I get the first booth of the night, an old couple, an hour into my shift. I turn to get menus and when I come up to the booth with them the woman is sitting alone and a red baseball hat is on the carpet next to her, the old man kneeling on the floor next to it, breathing heavily. His arm is resting on his knee, supporting his pudgy torso as he leans toward the hat. It must’ve fallen off when he sat down, I guess, and now he’s struggling to get it. Probably has a bad knee or hip or heart—most of our customers do. I grab the hat and lay it on the table between the menus, smiling down at the man.

“There you go!” I say cheerily as I turn and walk away, sure that helping him get up is beyond my job description and my moral obligation. As I get back behind the counter, I see Kate saying something into the kitchen window, jerking her eyes between the cooks she’s talking to and the man on the floor. Before I get close enough to hear her, Jesse and Ben run out of the kitchen, slide around the corner, and run past me. As I look behind me and see they’re heading to the old man, I call after them, “I got it.” Then, when they keep running, I turn to Kate. “I already picked his hat up,” I tell her.

From behind me, Jesse yells at us, “Kate, call an ambulance.” Kate spins and runs toward the phone, clumsily taking it off the rack and stabbing at numbers with shaking hands. I stand, frozen, next to the sink, listening to Katie’s fast voice behind me, watching as Ben kneels by the man and Jesse tries to ask his wife something. Between them, the red hat rests safely on the table.

A few minutes later we hear the sirens, quickly growing louder. Then three men run in, carrying an orange stretcher. They strap the man to it, battering his wife with questions.

“He has a bad heart,” she says, her voice wobbling, “He was going to order salmon.”

So we go to the funeral, bearing platitudes and an elaborate bouquet expressing our deepest apologies. “We know this will in no way make up for the tragedy you and your family are facing, but please take this gift certificate as a sign of our condolences. Good at any Big J’s location.”

None of us wanted to go, especially with these stupid flowers, but our boss had basically forced us, quoting orders from Big J himself. Kate, Jesse, Ben and I sit in the back of the old, musty church, our hands folded in our laps, our heads bowed to hide our lack of tears. When the man’s wife goes up to speak, I feel her eyes burning into the top of my head.

Next to me, Ben folds his program into a paper crane, creasing the man’s face and folding up his life story. Jesse smacks his hands and Kate laughs quietly. I know they think it’s my fault we’re here. They’d said so on the way over, as I was forced to crouch in the back of the catering van, getting knocked over by serving carts and pans sliding around.

“Why can’t I sit in front?” I’d asked when Jesse had opened the side door and pointed me in.
“Because there’s only room for three, and it’s your fault we’re here in the first place” Ben said, glaring at me in the rearview mirror. Jesse nodded and Kate looked back at me with sympathetic, but not disagreeing, eyes.

After the service, as we wait in line to greet the man’s wife and drop our card in the basket, I listen to her conversations with the people in front of us.

“It was his favorite,” I hear her teary voice telling a younger woman, “Wore it everywhere.” As I peek around the people ahead of me, I see her gazing fondly towards the middle of a table of fishing lures and guns and photos, her wrinkled hand softly touching the damn red hat.