

Chapter 2

All dressed in white, starched, clean, I feel like a nurse. White shoes, white stockings, white dress. White panties, white bra. White. I want to minister to the sick, to wipe sweat away from fevered brows. What I do is slop the hogs. By the end of the shift, the white will be marred by gravy and ketchup and thousand island dressing stains. I'll go home smelling like a hamburger. I'll make everyone hungry. "Damn it, Leroy," Mom will yell. "Git out of that waitress dress and into a pair of britches and take that makeup off. It makes you look like a tramp. And get busy in the kitchen. Your Pa will be home any time now and he'll want his supper waitin'."

But that's 10 hours away. Today, Saturday, is my favorite day at the truck stop, because I start with the sunrise, pushing coffee on bleary-eyed semi drivers and the breakfast bar on blue-haired ladies on the way to Florida with their bald-headed husbands. The new hot bar takes most of the work out of breakfast. It's a wonder, the way folks put it away when they pay four ninety-nine for all they can eat. They got to get their money's worth. They go right for the high-cost foods, too, piling thin strips of bacon high on their plates, lining link sausages up like sardines, stacking slices of ham, peppering their eggs, ladling gravy over sausage patties, smothering their pancakes with syrup and butter,

coming back time and time again to fill their tiny glasses with orange juice. They load themselves up with cholesterol and starch and fat and sugar and caffeine until I wonder how they make it to the cash register without having a stroke. Until I tear the breakfast bar down after lunch, there's not much to do but

keep the line stocked and clean up after the messiest eaters. I'm not allowed to ring up customers, on account of I've not been here six months yet. It's the third

truck stop I've worked at. The third truck stop I've had to work at. I keep ranging further afield, as the rumors of Leroy, Jr. keep pursuing me (with Johnny playing the part of the winged messenger). After what happened on Tuesday evening, it seems unlikely I'll ever be ringing up customers here. And this time, it wasn't even Johnny Ray's fault. I was in the walk-in cooler, stretching up for a tray of sliced cucumbers for the salad bar when I got grabbed from behind. It was Mr. DiPoulo, the area supervisor, a dirty little Greek man who thinks too much about what he calls the Big Nasty. He got more than he bargained for, for he encountered my Problem. Now, most men don't really care— not so long as they get theirs, if you know what I mean— but Mr. DiPee, he just backed away with this frightened look on his face. I half-expected him to make the sign of the cross at me, as if I were a vampire or something. He just stood there white-faced, and I said, "I won't tell if you won't," and he gulped and nodded his head and reached behind him and got the door of the walk-in open and slipped out. He won't tell, either, but I know how these things work. The manager will start finding fault with little things that I do, or maybe I'll be blamed for something that I didn't do, and I'll be looking for a job again. It's happened before.

Bobbo Joe, the Paiute Indian short-order cook, has a permanent hard-on for me. Maybe it's just that he has a permanent hard-on and it's usually pointed in my direction. He's furiously jealous of the truckers who call me Hon and leave big tips and pinch my fanny every now and

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The Problem
by Dallas Denny

The Problem

again. When he thinks a driver is getting fresh, he puts Visine in his food, which causes the driver great distress about a hundred miles down the road. Bobbo would lose his job if Mr. DiPoulo or Murray, the manager found out about it. But I don't tell and Bobbo doesn't tell, and the truckers don't associate being sick with their food— or at least don't think they've been Visined, for if they did they would drive their rigs back to the truck stop and kick the shit out of Bobbo Joe, who, although he stands six feet and nine inches tall, is little more than a boy and would probably just stand there and let them kick his ass.

I make lots of tips working here on Saturday and Sunday and three nights a week. I've filled all the drawers under my waterbed with quarters and half-dollars and dollar bills, and I have more than four thousand dollars in a CD account. It's my surgery money, my kitty account. I probably have enough to do something about my Problem, except that I've put plans on hold in that department on account of Mary June Cunningham.

You'll notice I've been capitalizing the word Problem. Sometimes writers do that, too. I like it better than the quote marks, so whether I'm speaking of it as a problem or as a "problem," from now on I'll call it a Problem.

Anyway, I could go overseas for surgery (it's cheaper there), and then I would be a whole woman, but if I did then M.J. would leave me and I would be heartbroken. I love Mary June and she loves my Problem. She wants it to get big and hard so I can push it into her body like a man pushes into a woman. That isn't likely to happen, because of the hormones I take, but sometimes it does stir around a bit, and it gets her all excited. I don't like her touching it— after all, it's not supposed to even be there, but I love M.J. and want to make her happy, and so I let her do what she wants to with it, even though I hate it and wish it were gone.

I can't believe I'm writing this down.

All the rest of the time except when Mary June is trying to get me to use it on her, I wish the Problem was gone. I wish it would screw off so I could keep it in my pocketbook along with my keys and compact and mascara and wallet. I wish that when Mary June wanted it, I could just dig it out of my purse, go to the bathroom and attach it.

Well, there's one other time when I would wear it, and that's when I am in the woods and there isn't a toilet handy. I would wear it then. And maybe, just maybe, I would put

it on in secret every now and again, just because the way I look I'm not supposed to have it. And if it would get big and hard, maybe I would whip old Leroy, Jr. out every once in a while and shock the church ladies. Maybe I would show it to Bobbo and tell him it just grew there overnight. Maybe I would let the next truck driver who tries to feel me up put his hand there and get a surprise. Maybe. But mostly, it would just sit in my purse, awaiting a legitimate use, and I would have the other thing, the female thing, all the rest of the time. And I would use it, too.

You wouldn't think truckers would be such big eaters of greens. After lunch I tear down the breakfast bar and set up the salad bar. It makes me smile to see a two-hundred pound man making a meal of lettuce and radishes and bean sprouts.

You wouldn't think truckers would be romantic, either, but they are, some of them. Archie Salesmin, who hauls screen doors from Gary, Indiana to Hollywood, Florida, brings me a red rose every time he comes through on the way south, and a white or yellow one when he comes through on the way north. He wants me to go out with him, but I'm afraid to on account of incompatible anatomies. The Problem, raising its ugly head again. Its Cyclopean eye. God only knows what he would do when he found out. So I just smile and take the roses and give Gary, Indiana a hug, being careful to keep my chest a handsbreadth from his so he won't get any ideas, and thank him, and three days later, he's back with another rose. I don't know, maybe the hug keeps him going. The roses sure help me to keep going.

A florid-faced, bald-headed married man from Oregon is flirting with me, telling me I'm pretty, hinting that he has something to show me up in the sleeper of his truck. Bobbo Joe isn't missing nothing, and thirty minutes from now, that trucker will be looking for a commode. Not knowing this, he shovels down his spaghetti and meatballs and tetrahydrozoline and winks at me. Bobbo stands in the kitchen with his hands out of sight and looks at me through the food window. He holds up a paper plate. A severed finger lies there, gore trickling out, only it's not gore, but cocktail sauce, and the finger, which is sticking through a hole he has cut in the plate underneath all that cocktail sauce, is still securely attached to Bobbo's hamlike hand.

Bobbo has a bag of tricks like Felix the Cat's. You wouldn't think about an Indian being a practical joker, but he's the world's worst. He's only been got once, and that

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The Problem

was by Murray Lockett, the manager, on payday, about a month ago. Bobbo had a new trick, and he was trying it on everyone. He would ask someone to get out a dollar bill. They would, and he would tell them to find on it the name of a famous movie and a brand of cigarettes. When they gave up, he would grab the dollar and tear it in two and holler "Half and Half and Gone With the Wind" and toss the pieces away and laugh like a hyena. After a dozen employees and customers had come to Murray to borrow the Scotch tape to hold their dollars together, he had asked someone why they wanted the tape and found out what Bobbo was up to. He'd waited until payday, and then cashed Bobbo's check, like always. Bobbo had clocked out and gone in the bathroom to fix his duck-ass, leaving his jacket on the counter, like he always does. Murray picked up the jacket and got Bobbo's wallet. He took out a twenty dollar bill and made me go to the cash register and get twenty ones. I hurried, so that Bobbo wouldn't be out of the necessary room before I got back— not that there was much danger of that, 'cause friend Bobbo has a fifteen-minute DA. Murray took all those ones and put them in the money clip in his front pocket and took off for the dining room.

Bobbo came out of the bathroom and was putting on his jacket when Murray came bursting into the kitchen and said, "I hear you got a trick, a good one. Show it to me." Bobbo said sure, give him a dollar. Murray did, but when Bobbo got to the part when he says "Half and Half and Gone With the Wind," he stopped and told Murray that he couldn't do it to him. Murray told him to go ahead, if it was a good trick. Bobbo tore the dollar apart and threw it and laughed like a fool.

Murray—and this is the part that killed me, only I couldn't laugh, 'cause Bobbo would have known something was up— Murray just stood there looking puzzled and then shook his head and said, "I didn't quite get that. Show me again," and took another of Bobbo's dollar bills from his money clip. Bobbo pointed at the two halves on the floor and asked Murray wasn't he going to pick them up and Murray waved his hand and said, "Later. I'm concentrating on learning this. Here. Show me again."

Well, Bobbo stood there tearing up dollars until there was a big pile of them on the floor, with Murray saying, "One more time. I think I've almost got it." When Bobbo tore up the last bill, Murray just turned and walked away. Bobbo hollered after him wasn't he going to pick up his money, but Murray just kept walking.

Well, when I told Bobbo whose money he had torn up and thrown all over the kitchen, he went white under his red skin. He was so shook up that if I hadn't of helped him match them up, he would have never got those dollars all taped together. Then, to make matters worse, he tried to pay for some coffee to go with one of them and Murray came up and told him he couldn't take that dollar as there appeared to be something wrong with it and it might be counterfeit.

Bobbo couldn't get back at Murray, on account of him being the boss, but he was mad at me for standing there not saying anything. One night about a week later, he kept disappearing. No one seemed to know where he was going. When I got off at midnight, I found out what he had been doing. He had gone out maybe four or five times an hour and thrown a five-gallon bucket of water on my car—which would have been no big deal, except that it was about five degrees outside. The tires were bulged out from the weight of the ice and I couldn't get the key in the lock. I had to carry buckets of hot water out and pour them over the door until I could get the key in the lock and get in the car and start it. While it warmed up, I sat in a White Freightliner with a man called Max and let him play with my breasts. I told Bobbo about it the next day, but it was too late for the Visine, as Max was about four states gone by that time.

I wonder what Bobbo Joe would do if he found out about Leroy, Jr.?

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