

The List She Made

by Charles Hale

And so, if only the clock had been one of those older ones with hands that moved instead of a red lighted digital one then maybe there would have been some noise in the room other than you breathing and tapping the marker on the paper. It was hard to call it working late, just in the bedroom of your apartment but the clock and the newspaper made you feel like you had clocked in.

Earlier in the day you had been asked a question that needed 24 hours of thought and so the paper, yesterday's and today's, was spread out, opened to the classified with maker in hand but there wasn't much to see. The newspapers had only provided four circles and none of them seemed awesome, just barely acceptable. For months and months and months your search had been managed on scratch paper, notes of whom you talked to or when to call back and once the rejection had been made you tossed it. For a time you considered burning the notes but it seemed too dramatic. Counting your rejections was out of the question but you were convinced the number was over forty when you decided it was time for the Hardee's application.

There were lies written all over it, the Hardee's application, a new kind of low. Franklin had been home for damn near a decade but you filled it in with spotty job histories from a town several hours away. The jobs were fast food like and held an obvious lack of ambition and after spilling a bit of something on it you dressed as disheveled as the kids hanging out at the gas station and mumbled when you dropped it off. When the manager called later that afternoon you forgot all the manners your mother taught and your wife had reinforced and agreed to be interviewed the next day.

Not much of nothing was happening in Hardee's at 3:10. The dining room smelled faintly of bleach and you watched a girl with a spray bottle and a towel. There were also the cars in the

drive-thru but no one seemed to be smiling after they took their bag and drove away. Before long the manager sat down.

"We'd like to have you," he said after the seven-minute interview. "I've got Wednesday night, Saturday day, and Sunday night open. You don't go to church do you?" And with a handshake you were making minimum wage.

You were given two uniform shirts, a hat, nametag and told to wear black jeans and shoes you could get dirty. On your first day they showed you the time clock, helped you clock in, then played a video. Later your training began at the fry station. There were regular fries, curly fries, chicken tenders and breasts, and a shit ton of grease. It was almost like the grease hung in the air, almost like you could lick it and that night even after you washed them, you could still feel the grease in the jeans. Peter was the designated trainer and he pointed out the buttons for the timers and the carton sizes and how much salt to use. "You really can't use too much," he said and you tried not to think about the heart attacks he'd probably caused.

Before Peter showed you the cleaning up and prepping you'd have to do before clocking out he let you make a few burgers and sandwiches. There were diagrams of all the burgers with their toppings pictured and written out everywhere and you wondered how anyone in a place like this ever made a mistake with all the helpful hints everywhere. You also noticed and tried not to laugh at several motivational sayings posted, *teamwork doesn't seem like work* one of them said, another said *the difference between adventure and adversity is attitude* and you wondered if they ever had to explain what adversity meant. Three days after training you Peter was a no call no show and didn't come in to get his last check. No one knew if something bad had happened to him and you were the only one who asked.

The Hardee's routine helped you forget all the rejection in your life and you began watching sports, not because you enjoyed it but because it was something the guys at work would be talking about the next day. Hardee's had a comprehensive training program

so over time you learned the basics of all the stations, grill, salads, front counter, back drive-thru, front drive-thru, and fryers, but they took a liking to you on the fry station first. "If you don't watch out those curly fries are going to make you famous," the general manager said to you in passing one day and the next you asked if you could work the back drive-thru.

It was like a cubby or a time-out station but the back drive-thru became where you felt best, surrounded by racks of buns but away from your co-workers, you took money and hoped no one from your former life would stop by. And weeks passed and more applications you had filled out were rejected. Rejection and failure. Rejection and failure. And the beeping of the back drive-thru in your sleep.

The sum total of all the r & f in your life you tried to erase because back when you still lived with your wife and were recently unemployed she started counting your failures. You didn't know she was counting. She would leave for work while you flipped through the paper and when she got home in the early evening she would ask you where you applied, had you called back from the previous days, and what they had said. You didn't know she was writing everything down on a yellow notepad and scratching things off for you. "When will you lower your standards and just get to work," she said. "I have a degree. And skills. And a work history," you said. "Degrees are like cars and houses," she said. "They're only worth what somebody will pay you for them."

The list she made had sixty-two failures on it when she showed it to you and the next day she said she was leaving but left the yellow notepad to remind you of who you were.

Today was three months into the Hardee's work and the general manager called you into his office. "I'd like to make you an assistant manager," he said and when you didn't respond immediately he had that look on his face like he had just offered you the best opportunity in your life and he was waiting to be congratulated.

"What does that entail," you asked finally. And wondered if he was going to ask you what entail meant.

"A dollar fifty raise, a few more hours, a new shirt and nametag," he said. "You'll count money some days or train. I'll need you to keep folks on the right track, that kind of thing." Again you didn't respond. You didn't know if there was a dollar figure to get your wife back but you were sure 25 hours a week at \$8.75 with greasy jeans and a new nametag wasn't it. This was the moment in your life when a promotion felt like an appraisal, a recalibration of expectancy. The timer on the fryer sounded and you still hadn't answered. You knew how many steps it was to the time clock and that there was a paper in the bin outside for three quarters and that you hadn't checked yesterday's yet. "Will you ask me again tomorrow," you asked and later at home you made dinner and considered what's next. And so, if only the clock had been one of those older ones with hands that moved instead of a red lighted digital one then maybe there would have been some noise in the room other than you breathing and tapping the marker on the paper.

