Lips Like Oysters

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

By the end of my Saturday night shift at the Oyster Bar I look like some kind of filthy nurse, striding around in my white uniform and thick-soled white shoes filling ketchups like it's an emergency, my front splattered and smeared with cocktail sauce, butter, oyster juice, and mud.

I am trying to get out. Trying to make it to Cooley's in time for last call. The guys there look a little sick to start with, faces slack-jawed, mouths hanging open, their pale lips loose and wet like the oysters I spent all night opening. When one comes up to me and says "You a nurse?" I say "Yeah, at Mercy," and I smile and let my jacket fall open to show the red and yellow splotches all over my front, the thick brown streaks the muddy oyster crates make across my middle when I dump the oysters into the ice bin. The oyster juice smells like old pee and the guy backs off fast.

It's not like I made a career choice to open oysters and clams all night every night, not like I want to watch people slurp the things down every time I look up. It's ugly. And the sounds. They alone will drive you crazy if you let them. Mouths turn into big open drains pulling hard. Oh and that reminds me, all you men who come in and eat two or three dozen oysters on the half-shell, don't think I don't know exactly why. I laugh at you guys behind your backs. And the thought of going to bed with you with all that oyster goo sloshing around in your bellies makes me, well frankly, makes me want to puke. That's why I'm always so nice to your dates.

I stay here for the money, but the work is hard. The crates of oysters and clams are heavy, made of chicken wire and shitty wood that gives me splinters and at first it's a struggle to get the oysters open. But then opening them gets easier, and then it's as easy as breathing. It's not like I have to twist the knife at an exact place

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either. I can put it in anywhere and break the suction. I hear the air escape or maybe my fingers feel it and they open right up.

I don't hold on too tight. Those oyster shells would slice my fingers like razor blades if I did. And when I open clams it's easy to jab the oyster knife into that tender part of my hand between my thumb and forefinger. To tell you the truth that place stays sore, that place where my palm spreads out like a wing.