

Pink

by Steve Young

Frank cut the tip of his finger off and it sort of shot over to the lettuce bin. The blood pumped out in tiny jets as he covered it with the palm of his other hand and ran to the sink. He pointed it in the sink and turned the water on, he could see the white of a bone and yellow-red flesh. The owner of the place came into the kitchen from his office and looked at him.

“What the hell did you do?” he asked.

“I cut my goddamn fingertip off, man” answered Frank.

The owner looked annoyed and demanded to see the damage. Frank took his other hand off the finger. The little jets of blood pumped into the sink.

“Oh, shit” said the owner. “For christ's sake hold it over your head so it don't bleed so damn much!”

Frank covered the finger with his other hand again, and held it over his head. He sat down on a bucket of deep-fryer oil. A waitress brought him paper towels, a trash bag full of ice, and a double bourbon.

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I knew things were going to end badly when the owner decided to make *me* manager. I had just turned twenty-one and the rest of the staff was around the same age. The other cooks and I would get stoned in the walk-in freezer, discussing which of the waitresses we had screwed and which ones we wanted to. The waitresses would get stoned in the walk-in freezer and discuss the same about the cooks.

Each night I was on duty I would make last call early. We would all dial-up our friends and invite them over for free booze.

Sometimes, if there was speed or coke, we wouldn't get out of there until minutes before the owner arrived in the morning.

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Frank's girlfriend was waiting up for him when he got home. She tried not to laugh as she listened to the key scratch and search for the lock. She hated him for staying and drinking at work all night, but she loved the way he talked when he was drunk. He would tell stories and act them out and she would laugh so hard she sometimes even peed a little. She liked him better when he was sober, but she could finally talk with him, instead of to him, when he was drunk. That is, he was responsive when he was drunk. She felt like he was keeping himself to himself when he was sober, but would let go enough to let her in when he'd been drinking. She hated herself for feeling that way, but she was very much in love with him.

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Two weeks after he cut his finger, Frank was at work and was very busy. The other cook had called in sick so Frank was alone trying to cook for an unusually large dinner crowd. He had a huge bandage of gauze and medical tape wrapped around his finger and after a few drinks, and getting stoned in the freezer, he was having a hard time keeping up with the orders. The same waitresses that were his flirty friends the night before were now standing impatiently at the server's window and whispering to each other about how bad their tips were going to be. Frank struggled to keep the orders straight and cursed himself regularly. He was preparing a French Dip with grilled onions when the owner came into the kitchen.

"How we doing back here, Frank?"

"If you have a minute, I could use some help."

The owner walked to the grill and picked up a spatula. He bunched the onions that were grilling into a pile and scooped them up. He held them up to Frank's face.

"Ya' see these? They are burnt. See? That little black edge developing there? I can't have that in my restaurant. Start some more on there and try to get it right"

He threw the onions in the trash can and dropped the spatula on the grill.

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I felt so good walking home with that eighteen-pack of beer in my hand. The night was nice and cool compared to the kitchen, and the relative silence of the streets gave me a kind of quiet buzz. I was crossing Thomas Rd in front of a jeep with four girls in it. One of them asked where I was going with the beer. I answered home to my girlfriend. She said I would have a better time with them, but I just kept walking. I couldn't wait to get home and tell my girlfriend the story. I was proud of myself for walking out, I was proud of the way I threw my apron at the owner's face, and I was proud of what I said when he threatened to keep my last paycheck:

"Keep it, fucker."

* * *

When Frank told her the story she couldn't believe the smile on his face. She hadn't found work for weeks and to her the whole thing just sounded like an overreaction or another excuse to leave work and get drunk.

"But, Frank, what if he doesn't give you your last paycheck"?

"Fuck him! If it comes in the mail, I'll send it back!"

She let it go and joined in the beer drinking. She loved him so much, but somewhere in the middle of the night suddenly saw he was really very stupid. He had already taken all of her silver dollars to buy cigarettes. Rent was due and the only food they had been

eating was what he stole from the restaurant; yet all he cared about was how cool he had been when he quit his job.

After the beer was gone he stood in the kitchen yelling the story to her, again. She was getting drunk too by now, and stood up. She walked up to him and punched him in the belly. It was a lot softer than she had anticipated, and her fist went right in. Frank dropped to his knees and started coughing. He laid down on the tile floor and threw up. She went to the bedroom closet and pulled out a pink suitcase that used to be a deep, dark red.

