New Dishes

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"When Emily walked into the kitchen, blinking against sleep and still fastening the buttons on her uniform, her mother was already clearing cupboard space for the new dishes. Despite its being just past six, she was almost dancing around the kitchen, singing under her breath. The best mood she'd been in for six days, Emily noted."

Cover Page Footnote
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by
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"Want some scrambled eggs?" Her question stopped Emily mid-grab, hand wavering by the Rice Krispies box. Eggs didn't sound that appetizing, but Mom was offering to make breakfast...the novelty was pleasing.

"Sure, thanks." The first word was grateful, the second nearly strangled in unbidden hostility. Emily caught her breath, waiting for a response. None came, save the clatter of the dishes.

Emily wandered back to the bathroom to kill time until breakfast was ready. Suddenly, in the hallways, she realized her mother -- she was acting like today was some special occasion. In Emily's estimation, it was a day like any other; nothing special. Every day is the same, she thought: convincing myself that it's worth getting out of bed, going to work, coming home, and...well, there didn't seem much more to it than that. Emily gave her hair unneeded brushing, considering her reflection until enough time had passed to go back to the kitchen.

One scrambled egg and two slices of toast with jelly sat neatly on one of the new dishes. Emily chewed slowly, disinterestedly examining the plate's pattern. Yesterday, Mr. and Mrs. Misceli down the street had been visiting, scarfing down appetizers and whiskey-sours, when the delivery came. Mrs. Misceli had just asked Emily how she was doing; not realizing that it was a polite, rhetorical question, she had tried to answer, only to be discarded when the doorbell rang.

It was just as well. Emily shrugged; I didn't want to talk to her anyway. Anyone who can be thrown into ecstasies by the arrival of flowered taskware is not my ideal conversational partner. Admiration of the dishes continued well into dessert. Emily managed to sneak an extra serving of chocolate mousse; not much, but it was a nice day, honey. It was the same answer everyday.

The store was busy today. When Emily had first started working register, she cringed every time a customer approached, afraid of their demands, their usual rudeness. Now, after more than a year, she preferred a crowd. The busier it got, the easier it was to move without thinking, answer questions without having heard them, smile pleasantly without meaning it at all. Still, even with so much practice, it always took a few minutes to hit stride, to fall into that groove where you don't feel anything.

Soon Emily had been working steadily for two hours without a break in concentration. Then a woman came to her register with a shopping cart full of sale sweaters. Despite the two giant neon signs above the sweater display proclaiming 'LIMIT 2 PER CUSTOMER,' people had been buying more than two all day, and Emily had let them: the customer is always right. But this was ridiculous. Emily politely alerted the customer to the limit. The woman bared her teeth -- a hostile, pseudo smile. "If I had someone else with me, I would give half the sweaters to them to buy, but I don't. So just ring them up for me."

It was a sweetly delivered threat. Emily restrained herself from laughing in the woman's face, or smacking her hand. The woman had lipstick on her teeth: a hereditary trait of Mrs. Misceli, the pudgy housewife who found incredible excitement in soap operas, neighborhood gossip, and of course --dishes. "I could have you fired," the woman hissed. Suddenly, Emily realized that those 12 new place settings cost more than she earned in two months.

The customer still glared at Emily, waiting for her to submit. "How empty is your little bourgeois life," said Emily, "that you get off by bullying a kid for some incredibly tacky sweaters?" Emily stayed long enough to watch the woman's mouth drop, then made a quick exit before she began to howl.

Emily made her way to the car quickly, despite her heart's attempts to force its way out of her body. It took a minute to get the key into the door. She sat behind the wheel, taking deep breaths, half expecting the irate customer -- or her boss -- to attack. Finally, she started the car and drove home, shaking and laughing -- sometimes alternating, sometimes both at once.

The house was unusually quiet. There was a note on the kitchen table:

Em.
Forgot to tell you-going to Aunt Sally's for dinner. There's food in the fridge. Be back later.
Love,
Mom
P.S. Use a paper plate.

Emily read the note twice. Her mouth twitched, but the smile refused to surface. She went to the cupboard, took down one of the splendid new dishes, and with force but not passion, smashed it against the floor. She looked down at the pieces for a full ten minutes without a single thought. Then the smile tried again, starting at the corners of her mouth. A sudden flash brought a snapshot of Mom's beaming face when she first saw her new dishes, and the smile admitted defeat.

Tears came like an unexpected slap, and she was on the floor, urgently gathering pieces, sobbing convulsively. As she clasped the jagged shards, edges cutting into her palms, Emily waited for the sound of the front door opening, and wished for a day like any other; nothing special.
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