

Pulling a Benny

Walt loved to sharpen the knives. He was hypnotized by the rhythmic scraping of metal on stone. He performed each swipe with care, applying pressure evenly along the length of the edge. A sharp blade could pass through a tomato like it was made of air. A few more scrapes would make it perfect.

Greg was juggling grapes on the line. Vicky paced the floor on server-side, stopping to warm her hands on the lamp-heated steel where they passed fries. Her hair was in a neon mohawk today, and while mohawks were generally ridiculous, everything worked on Vicky. She could wear a pile of mashed-potatoes as a hat and somehow pull it off.

Walt stopped scraping. A ten-dollar blade didn't deserve a fine polish. It would lose its tip to a newbie in a week. He hung his knives and paced the kitchen—a clean kitchen, floor swept, counters cleared. Stocked. No tickets. Juggling grapes.

Walt was bored.

He was never bored. Long he had awaited some mythical Tuesday with nothing to do. A chance to get his thoughts together. Take a breather. Now it was here, it seemed a foreign concept. He could feel the labor percentage creeping up. He should have been *doing* something. He remembered nights in his boarding school dorm that were properly boring, staring out a window at

the tree, content. At what point did pain become more comfortable than relaxation?

At the front of the kitchen, Dana burst through the double-doors that led to the dining room. Walt perked up. She speed-walked, clipboard in hand, a tight-lipped frown stamped on her face. She looked at Walt squarely, and sighed.

“I don’t like that sigh,” said Walt. “It’s going to be something stupid, isn’t it?”

“Usually when we have to talk, it’s going to be something stupid.” She leaned in and spoke in a conspiratorial hush, “It’s Benny.”

News about Benny was never good. He didn’t graduate anything, he didn’t save anyone from a fire. If he won the lottery, it would make things worse. If he was getting hitched or having kids, it was a forgone disaster.

“He’s not wearing his chef-coat,” said Dana.

Walt exhaled and waited for more. “That’s it?”

“It’s your job, Walt.”

Under the grey light of the dishroom, Benny loaded a glass-rack. He twirled each glass before slipping it into a slot. He grunted along to the death-metal blasting in his headphone, heard clearly over the whooshing of the hood-vents and angry buzz of the ice-machine.

“Benny does coke in the bathroom and makes deals out by the dumpster,” said Walt, “and *this* is your concern.”

She shrugged. “Other than wearing the coat, he does his job.”

“Mm,” said Walt, rubbing his beard-net in thought, “but we’re making him wear a coat, on top of running around a kitchen, on top of being high as shit on cocaine. Medically, I feel like something’s gotta give.”

Dana threw up her hands. “Obviously it’s the cocaine.”

Benny stopped cold and eyed them both, a glass caught in mid-twirl. He turned slowly back to the rack, torn jeans exposing a sliver of bare cheek.

“Tell that to him,” said Walt.

Dana chewed on her lip like gum. The kitchen was backwards. Dana was powerless over Walt, just as Walt was powerless over his crew. The grunts would blister and bleed for people’s food, and even Walt felt like a martyr for the cause of some distant owner’s profits—but all that pain and scrambling earned them a prize; they did as they pleased. It was the way of the kitchen, to do a job so unwanted, so well, that no authority dared criticize.

That’s why, when Dana grumbled her way to the office to vape, and Walt took his place on the sandwich station, it was the grubby dishwasher who had ruled on policy. Cocaine was allowed, and chef-coats were optional.

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“Yo, boss,” said Greg, tossing his pesto cavatappi high in the air and catching it in the pan. “You want to hear a joke?”

His bright eyes made Walt feel dull. “Long or short?”

“It’s kind of a long one,” Greg admitted. A noodle missed the pan and landed on the range near an open flame. Slowly it blackened and the smell of burnt pasta filled the air.

“The line needs stocking.”

“It’s Tuesday,” Greg objected.

“I don’t care.” Walt pointed at the double-doors. “You don’t know what’s walking in tonight.”

“Okay, I got a short one for you.” Greg was pushy today.

A ticket popped up. The name at the top corner caught Walt’s eye.

Brandon Franks

Smoke mid-rare, no tomato

Gluten Allergy

“So what’s the difference—”

Walt held his palm out to Greg and stared down the screen. Brandon Franks didn’t have a gluten allergy. Brandon Franks just *said* he had a gluten allergy.

Walt thought of the kid with the shark-tooth necklace, the kid who’d shoved him in the hallways and once replaced his hamburger with a ball of snow wrapped in foil. How was that even a joke! It wasn’t the jokes that made Walt hate him. It wasn’t that Franks had targeted Walt when he was truly alone. It’s that Walt had let him. He wouldn’t let him now.

“Gluten-free smoke walking in,” said Greg, gently.

“I got it,” said Walt, staring at the screen.

His eyes drifted to the double-doors, little round windows in each one. He walked up and peeked through. There sat Franks at table five, that same smirk he remembered, a bottom lip now studded with a gawky diamond. Almost everyone deserved a reset after boarding school, a chance to leave the baggage of youth behind. There seemed no point in granting that to Franks.

Vicky swept past into the dining room and almost bashed Walt's head with a tray of drinks. "Watch out, honey!"

Walt went back to the line to watch the ticket-time climb. Greg was going for a burger. "I got it," said Walt.

Five minutes, nothing dropped. Greg asked Walt if he was *good*. Walt was good like Benny was good. Walt grabbed a bun, a regular brioche bun, threw down a butter-spot, sopped the bread and let it crisp to golden-brown.

"You know that's not gluten-free, boss."

"Take five, Greg." Greg shrugged and left the kitchen.

Walt plated the toasted bun and marched to the double-doors. He wasn't good at smiles, but he put on his friendliest face and walked through.

Franks waved his long-island around in gestures at Vicky, spilling it all over the table. Vicky smiled and nodded and wiped his table with a towel while maintaining eye-contact as he prattled on.

"Brandon Franks," said Walt, placing the plated bun on his table with a clank.

Franks' smile faded as he looked Walt's way. "Walter," he said evenly, and looked back to Vicky. "But yeah, it's a fresh pierce."

"I can see," she said.

“And it’s swollen now...” It was. Frank’s lip was swollen and blue. It occurred to Walt only now to feel guilty—guilty for feeling good, for feeling...

Hateful.

“I can see that too,” said Vicky, nodding, eye contact, wiping with the towel. More long-island spilled on the top of her hand.

“I saw you got the gluten-free,” said Walt. Franks inhaled deep and looked up at an awning of lights. “Yep.”

“It’s not a good choice,” said Walt. “It’s all mealy and stale. And a three-dollar up-charge. I don’t want you to waste your money unless it’s a serious allergy that you’ve... developed.”

“I’m good, Walter.”

Vicky smiled at Walt with wide, nervous eyes. “Thanks, though.”

“And you know,” Walt went on, “when I see *gluten allergy*, it’s stressful, because I’m afraid of, well, *literally fucking killing someone.*” Walt laughed. “I mean, that’s fine, because you have an allergy, I just thought that if it’s one of those... minor allergies, maybe you’d appreciate the toasted brioche, because we get it from a local bakery.”

He slid the plate across the table to Franks, ceramic roaring across the wood.

Franks turned to Vicky. “He was like this when he was younger,” said Franks, “always just *there.*”

Walt narrowed his eyes. “Eat the bun, Franks.”

“I don’t want a plain bun, asshole, go make my food.”

“Eat the bun,” Walt insisted, politely. Vicky backed away and headed for the kitchen. Franks clenched his jaw as she walked away. He looked back to Walt with a glare and stretched his words “*Make, my, food.*”

“Eat the bun!” Walt grabbed the bun and felt the warm bread squeezing through his fingers. “Eat the bun, you fucking asshole!” He threw the bun. It smacked Brandon’s cheek and his long-island shattered on the floor. “Every time,” said Walt, “every opportunity you got, you were an asshole, without reason, and you haven’t even tried to change.”

Franks poked his lower-lip with his tongue like he was flashing his diamond. “Why change all this?”

Walt expected more from Franks. It was a let-down, to discover the villain of his youth could be so easily dismissed. His anger fell away. His toasted brioche was now a wad of dough with fist-prints, soaking in a puddle of liquor and glass.

Walt looked back to the kitchen and saw Benny, peering through the window with a slack-jawed smile. Even he knew to hide behind the double-doors. That’s when Walt realized he was fired.

A family watched in silence from a table in the corner. Walt’s throat tightened up, he struggled to breath. What a waste of a rebellion. Franks would get his drinks on the house. Greg would make his food okay.

“Fuck you, Franks,” Walt said. Zinger. His voice came out high and broken and he rolled his eyes at his own nerves. Impulsiveness fit him like a loosely wrapped burrito. He shook his head and speed-walked back to the kitchen.

“Hurricane Walt, ya’ll!” Benny cheered, and Walt looked away as he rushed past. Vicky reached out with a comforting hand, and Walt rushed past. Greg returned from his five—Walt rushed past.

Dana peeked her head out of the office. “Why *hurricane Walt*? What did you do?”

Walt opened his mouth to speak, but he only found breath. He tore off his chef-coat and left his kitchen behind.

Hash-Brown Therapy

Warm light spilled from a clouded pane on the front door, glowing on the manicured—flowers. Walt didn't know flowers. He walked, hunched, into the shadow at the side of the house. He descended a flight of steps to a sunken side-entrance, its floor concrete with a moldy drain.

It was always too cold in the basement where Walt lived. Above him his landlord stomped around and the dog scrambled, its toenails clicking on the floor.

There it was again. Walt soured at the sight of his own life. Dread gripped his throat and pulled it through his stomach. A pile of worn shoes gathered mold. A stack of unread books reminded him of his worth. His mattress was a pile of lumpy mashed-potatoes on the floor. His kitchen, the kitchen of the so-called *executive chef* of the trendiest bar in town, was a cubical with an empty cupboard and an electric stove, littered with beer cans and greasy take-out.

He locked his jaw. When his mind turned against him, when it gorged on pity, he needed to reset his body. He needed to sleep, exercise, or eat.

Today's special was microwaved chicken-breast and broccoli. A sprinkle of Mediterranean salt brightened the poultry's natural flavors. Roasted peppercorns added a fiery kick. The broccoli was served unwashed and raw, to preserve the earthy flavors and crispness of the florets. Walt

topped the plate with a drizzle of buttermilk aioli, a garnish of cold bacon-bits, and a hard-boiled egg he found in the back of the fridge.

He set the table and reached for a fork. It was no time to glare at the plate. He nibbled on a floret, chewing with effort. It tasted like sandy grass. *Swallow it.* His mouth hung open, broccoli on his tongue. *Swallow it.* He gagged and spat green mush into his water.

He pushed the glass back and groaned, feeling a wave of scrutiny and disgust, an attack on his self—regurgitating, and moping. Lonely and alone. There it was again, all over the place, running rampant.

He drowned the egg in hot sauce and shoved it whole in his mouth, bits of shell included.

His phone rang—*Daryl's Bar and Grill*. He chewed and gave it another ring. “Yeah,” he said, tonguing egg out of his teeth.

“Where are you?” It was Dana, in a fluster. Her breath sounded like a hurricane in the phone. “What are you doing?”

“Eating an egg.”

“What?”

She heard what Walt said, so he stayed quiet.

“Why are you eating an egg when you’re scheduled, and brunch is in an hour?”

“Right, but...” Walt shook his head. Words came with effort.

“What? The bun?”

“Yes, the bun,” Walt spat, “of course the bun. I threw food at a customer, are you telling me I’m not fired?”

“You should be,” she said, “and you’re lucky I like you. And you probably *should* be fired. And you would be, if...”

He held the phone outstretched and let it chatter. When he brought it back to his ear, she was waiting for a response. He mumbled incoherently.

“What? Are you coming or not?”

His answer came by reflex, “On my way.”

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Only the biggest assholes could get fired in a job so objectively bad. That was the best part—the freedom of not having a real career. The freedom not to care. Walt swore he would never again hold a job he wasn’t willing to lose.

The business rattled his ears before he stepped inside—the chatter of customers, the clinking of dishes, the crescendo of college kids cheering the sports on TV. He walked into Daryl’s Bar and Grill without his chef coat, matching shirt, or sharpie. He never liked those things.

He made his way through the bustle with his gaze forward, zipping through hurried servers and shoving through a group of oblivious drinkers. He burst through the doors to the kitchen and saw in his periphery a full screen, tickets red. The servers were yelling at the cooks, the cooks were yelling at expo, and expo was yelling at the servers, and they all only heard themselves.

Walt walked past, straight into the office, ignoring Dana as she put on her concerned voice and inquired. Walt turned the bronze knob, and the lights dimmed. The cook-line was lit like a middle-school dance. He cut the house music and connected his own; classical soundtracks, slower than sin. It was the sort of music nobody plays in a kitchen since it clashed with the present aesthetic of chaos and war. Some servers laughed and murmured, and the kitchen clattered on.

Dana dropped the concerned voice. “Walt, what the fuck are you doing?”

“Adjusting the mood,” he explained. He took his place on sauté and grill, shoeing Greg away to salad. The yelling had calmed. It didn’t seem appropriate with a swelling orchestra. Walt took a breath—a long, luxurious, deep inhale, the kind of breath he’d normally feel guilty for taking during a rush. In walked seven steak and eggs, sides of hash, a special egg on every order, medium-plus on that last one. Walt locked eyes with the screen. What the fuck was a medium-plus? On an egg? He decided it just meant *good*.

But the hash—the hash wasn’t dropped. Twenty-seven menus open, god knows what else coming to that flat-top—burgers, french toast, four kinds of tacos, but always the hash. Always the hash in abundance, then doubled, and tripled again, and always the fucking hash!

“Hash!” Walt pointed a trembling hand at the hottest spot of the flat. Greg obliged.

Much is said about making food with love, and not enough about hate. Walt hated those eggs to perfection. He would not have them sent back, he

would not hear a complaint. He would damn the customer who spoke ill of their egg. Whether poached, scrambled, or over-whatnot, every egg was a challenge to complaint, and his steaks just occurred, perfect every time, as if by accident. He poked his meat and wiped his rims and fanned out his slices of steak so the juicy-red peeked out from under the grill-marks. “Order up, two minutes on hash!” The servers snatched his plates and Walt almost begged them to stop for one more look.

Nobody knew his kitchen like Walt—the knick in every blade, the hidden caches of towels, the right way to jiggle the flickering fluorescent bulb above prep. The prioritization of hash. The right amount of coke for Benny to wash dishes like a star. Walt could patty ground-beef into a playable hockey-puck in ten seconds. He was the indisputable master of his greasy corner of the world.

“Yo, boss,” said Greg. “You ready to hear that joke?”

“That...” said Walt, “that joke from like three days ago?”

“Yeah.”

Walt clicked his tongs. “Lay it on me.”

“Okay, here it is.” Greg shuffled on his feet with a grin, too excited to get it out with proper timing. “So, like, what’s the difference between apples and orphans?”

The tongs stopped clicking. Walt maintained an even look.

“So, apples get picked.”

There it was again. Boarding school, with Franks. “Solid joke,” said Walt.

Greg smacked the new guy's arm. "Walt liked it."

"Okay, but I'm not sure."

"He said he liked it," said Greg.

"It seemed pretty half-hearted—"

"Yo, he said it was a solid joke. That means he liked it."

It was settled. Walt liked it.

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When he got back to his basement, it looked the same. It should have looked different. He'd put in the work. He'd earned a happy few hours, at least, but there it was again, waiting at the door.

Eat, nap, or exercise.

He wasn't hungry. He wasn't sleepy. His body felt like... mashed potatoes. Walt had scooped too many mashed potatoes. He laid in bed, as if to sleep, and saw sandwiches on the ceiling, and they all had too much mayonnaise. And he loved mayonnaise, but he hated these sandwiches because there was slightly too much mayonnaise, and they were made by someone else, and there would never be a right way to tell that someone else the right amount of mayonnaise to put on a sandwich, because even if they would bother, the nozzle on the bottle is too wide to get a thin streak across the veggies, and it somehow seems like a hassle to tell the subway-girl to change nozzles.

Walt awoke to a phone call. Greg called off, tired of scooping potatoes.
Walt now had double potato duty.

His answer came by reflex, “I’m on my—”

“You’re on your way?”

A sun ray peeked through a cloud, past a house, through the bushes outside Walt’s tiny window, and danced gold on the concrete floor. “How’s it look?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what... the new guy is there to help Greg?”

Dana let the silence stretch. “He is.”

“He seems like a bright fella,” said Walt, and hung up the phone.