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# Toledo, Ohio 1997

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## Toledo, Ohio 1997

*BRENNA DUGAN*

Rushing through the back entrance,  
I wrinkled my nose at the smell  
of grimy grease,  
harsh disinfectant,  
and hamburgers.  
I tied on my black apron  
as the eldest cook  
stared at my butt while I clocked in.  
He said I looked like a porcelain doll,  
then snuck out the back door  
to smoke pot between orders.  
At Big Boy, taking orders and carrying  
piles upon piles of slippery, slathery food  
was easier than convincing the cooks  
to throw in another batch of fries.  
Here, I was considered privileged.  
They thought I came from money.  
I lived in the suburbs, with two parents—  
without fear of gangs or stabbings.  
I owned an ancient car  
which I paid for, religiously,  
on the 15th of every month.  
I was a minority in this restaurant.

Six black girls sat at my table once—  
they all ordered sundaes, which  
I had to make on my own,  
one by one.  
I scooped and gently pieced together my creations,  
giving each a loving touch of whipped cream.  
My wrist hurting, I delivered my masterpieces  
to a table where the giggling girls once sat.  
They couldn't wait, or  
maybe they forgot their money.  
With strawberry stickiness  
up to my elbows,  
I trudged back to the wait station.  
Throwing away ice cream is a sin,  
so I reluctantly passed the sundaes

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to the cooks, through the order window--  
after taking one for me.  
They liked to imagine that  
I really thought they deserved those sundaes.

I waited on a couple every Friday night.  
She was about 25, he looked 55.  
They always ordered coffee.  
Despite the fact that I was just days over 17,  
she told me to be sure I wasn't on birth control.  
"You need to start havin' kids," she'd say.  
"More coffee?" I'd reply.

One afternoon I made friends with a graphic designer.  
Her job was what I wanted after college.  
I asked a lot of questions and  
she left ten-dollars for my tip.  
An hour later, she called the restaurant,  
apologetically saying she thought it was a dollar bill.  
She was back within fifteen minutes to collect.

After the customers left, I would sweep  
and listen to the broom crackling across the floor  
as it sifted through the balled-up paper placemats,  
broken red and yellow crayons,  
and small butter containers  
that were tossed during my shift.  
Then, I'd mop my section, flinging gallons of water  
everywhere in the rush to get done quickly.  
With stained shoes drenched in disinfected water,  
I'd walk to the salad bar to put away vegetables  
and salad dressing. I always got Thousand Island under my fingernails  
and it always smelled like mayonnaise.  
The Italian dressing mingled with the ice cream  
that was still on my forearms.  
When I went to the back  
to stock the napkins,  
they stuck to me.