

"Commiseration"

By A.L. Likely

allikelystory@gmail.com

About 2,200 words

Susan fidgeted as she waited in line. Shifting her weight from one leg to the next, running her thumb up and down the inside of her purse strap, and looking up at the clock on the back wall behind the cashier's counter every fifteen to thirty seconds. She knew she was going to be late to work, which actually meant she was going to show up right on time, but for Susan, showing up less than fifteen minutes before her shift started was *late*. She took too long in the shower.

The man at the front of the line wished the cashier a good day as he turned to leave. He walked passed the line as it shuffled forward a step. Susan looked at him, but the man kept his eyes forward on the glass door that led to the freedom that was the rest of his day, and kept walking. Susan paused her mental scolding over her shower this morning, to wonder about the man who passed. Was it too much to ask for a comforting smile between strangers these days? Too much for a nod of encouragement as if to say, "It felt like I waited forever too, but you'll be out of here before you know it." Did this sort of acknowledgement from strangers even exist, or was she just imposing a commiseration of waiting at this archaic property

management company on nameless people that couldn't actually care less about being there waiting.

She looked back up at the clock then back to the front of the line. There were two more people in front of her, both women who looked liked they were around the same middle age. The one directly in front of her didn't have as nice of a hair stylist though. Either that or she dyed her hair from a box. Susan wondered what color was trying to be achieved when the end result was an unnatural orange-tinted, honey brown. A lot of women dye their hair that color, and she was perplexed as to why.

She pulled her eyes away from the confusion that was the back of the woman's head and looked again at the clock. As she did, she saw a familiar face walk underneath it. Her face was still like porcelain, pale as snow and smooth, but her bright blue eyes were sunken behind dark circles. Her white blonde hair was ornately rolled into a French twist and Susan could tell by its thickness that she had kept her hair long. No mistake, it was Dani.

Susan felt a little smile spread across her face as she watched this woman who was once the girl she knew, carry herself with confidence as she approached the cashier to assist her with the woman at the front of the line. The

cashier appeared to be having trouble pulling up the woman's account, and here, her old friend was helping her.

Susan tried to remember the last time she had seen her, and her smile faded a little. They had met while waiting tables one summer at a greasy spoon diner, and they had hated each other immediately. Dani was bossy, and Susan hated being micro-managed, even at an age where the term "micro-managed" wasn't a part of their vocabulary, Susan hated it. She was sixteen, Dani was eighteen and she reminded Susan of the snobby, cheerleaders that she avoided at school. But as the summer wore on, the waitresses that worked the graveyard shift ended up hanging out together. While they weren't without their dramas, the five of them still grew close.

Susan thought of the other girls, Abbey, Courtney, and Flora. She had bumped into Courtney at a grocery store a few years ago. Her cart had more kids than groceries in it, and she spent the majority of their brief encounter explaining how her, "son-of-a-bitch ex-husband" was going to lose a valued appendage if he didn't "cough up the child support soon." Neither one suggested exchanging phone numbers or to try to get together.

Susan hadn't seen Flora since she quit the diner. The last time she saw Abbey was also the last time she saw Dani. Nine years ago.

She stared at Dani, hoping to catch her eye. She felt eager to know how she was doing. Dani clicked away on the keyboard of the computer, apologizing to the lady, explaining that their system was running really slow. She didn't look up at her.

Susan's smile was almost gone now. She clutched her purse strap, remembering her last night at the diner:

Her boyfriend Paul, and a couple of his friends, Mike and Justin had a booth in her section. They had spent most of that evening drinking coffee, chain smoking, and scheming about how to get better gigs for their band, *The Clacks*.

It was a slow weekday night, and Susan was working the floor with only Flora. It was Courtney's turn to leave early if it wasn't busy, and she had left around eleven-thirty. Abbey and Dani had the night off.

Susan couldn't remember now why the guys decided to take off so early that night. They would normally hang out until two or three in the morning before calling it a night, but that night they left around one. Susan cleaned their table, and wiped up the flecks of cigarette ash from

the booth seats and saw that Paul had left his wallet. She tucked it into her apron pocket, thinking that he'd either come back for it or she'd give it to him when she saw him the following afternoon.

It was an unremarkable bar rush that evening. The bars closed at three, which on weekday nights usually produced at least a dozen intoxicated bar patrons that are trying to eat their way sober or bar staff getting off work and enjoying a stack of pancakes with their crew. She remembered Flora coming up to her at one point during their little rush, complaining that one of her customers vomited all over the table and didn't leave a tip. Susan joked that if he had left a few bucks on the table she probably didn't want it anyway.

Sometime after four the phone at the cashier station rang, and Susan was able to catch it on the third ring. It was her mother explaining that the police had called their house just then asking about Paul, and that she had better get to the hospital. They weren't sure if it was him or not, but had her number in his pocket and was in an old blue sedan driven by a "Justin". They had been in a car accident.

Susan's memory of the rest of that night were just flashes of moments. Like flipping through an old photo

album. She remembered seeing his broken, bloody body, in the emergency room. She remembered how vacant his eyes were as his body trembled with seizures. She remembered the doctor's voice telling her that as his brain swelled, it was crushing itself and there was nothing that could be done. She couldn't remember the doctor's face, but she knew that if she heard his voice again she would know it instantly.

Mike and Justin were both in the ICU with broken ribs, one of them had broken his pelvis the other had a punctured lung. She couldn't remember which.

Dani had showed up that night at the hospital to sit with her. No one else would come. Paul's mom lived in Phoenix. The police had contacted her. Dani had brought Susan take-out tacos, explaining that she didn't know how long they'd be there but that she had heard how bad the hospital food was.

When he had passed, sometime around seven that morning, Dani had taken Susan home with her, gave her clean clothes and sat up with her as she cried then finally slept.

Susan never went back into the diner.

She had lost touch with the girls as autumn came. She had lost touch with most of her friends with a few

exceptions, not really feeling up to having fun. She had heard that Flora quit the diner a few weeks after she had, and heard rumors that she had left state.

The woman at the front of the line had concluded her business and much like the man before her, turned to leave without any acknowledgement of those waiting in line behind her as she hurried out the door. Susan tried again to catch Dani's eye before she left the cashier's desk to return to what ever office she came out from.

Dani saw her and forced a smile. Without a word to her though, she walked back to the offices, passing under the clock. Susan, feeling disappointed at her response, glanced back up at the clock.

Dani and Abbey had shown up at Susan's house one day in the early spring following Paul's death. Susan hadn't seen either one in months, and was elated when she saw who it was at her front door.

"My sister's dead," Dani blurted out before Susan could even get the greeting out of her mouth.

"You know what it's like," Dani said to her. Her voice sounded as though she was pleading for something, but Susan didn't know what to say.

She sat with them in the living room as Dani explained that her sister left behind her three-year-old daughter,

how no one saw it coming, and how grief stricken her mother was. Each statement she made was followed by a, "you know" or "you understand" but Susan didn't.

Abbey didn't speak but a few words here and there. Susan listened and tried to ask questions she thought were appropriate, but she had no words of comfort. She felt completely lost, because where death was concerned no one ever spoke a word that she thought was actually comforting, or assuring. She didn't know why people had to die or have any belief as to where they went after or if they went anywhere at all. The only thing she knew was that it sucked, but she couldn't say that to Dani. Not then, anyway.

That awkward afternoon was the last time she saw either one, until today. She had tried to get in touch with Dani a few months after she stopped by, but her phone number had changed or disconnected.

Standing there, next in line, Susan felt an immense guilt build within her that she hadn't done more, said something more. Made an effort.

It was finally her turn. She didn't bother to glance at the woman with the bad hair color to see if she too lived in a world of her own.

"Name," the cashier said in a flat monotone.

"Good morning," Susan began with forcefulness behind her pleasantries. "Susan Malone." She passed her rent check across the counter to the cashier as the cashier typed her name into their system.

"Your rent was due on the first," the cashier said flatly.

"You were closed on the first, which was yesterday, which was Sunday," Susan stated, increasing the firmness in her voice. What a ridiculous thing to say. "Besides, it's not technically late until the tenth of the month as per my rental agreement."

"You could have mailed it in," the cashier said as she stamped the back of her check.

"Every time I mail it in you guys say it's late," Susan said through her gritted teeth. "Perhaps this institution should take advantage of the twenty-first century and let us pay online."

The cashier snorted at Susan's comment, then banged on her keyboard. "This is frozen up again. You don't need a receipt do you?"

"Yes, actually I do," Susan replied knowing full well that this would be the time they'd claim she didn't pay.

Glaring at her, the cashier picked up her phone hit a button and said, "It's doing it again." Then hung up.

Susan returned her glare and waited.

Dani came back out from the back carrying a book. She handed it to the cashier and said, "Just hand write receipts today until we can get IT down here to fix it."

"Hi, Dani," Susan said, her voice and tone immediately brightening.

"Hey, Susan," Dani responded and looked at her. Her look was impatient.

"It's good to see you. How've you been?" Susan tried to make her voice sound as light and happy as she was when she saw her a few moments before.

"Busy, very busy," Dani replied. The cashier handed Susan her hand written receipt as Susan watched Dani walk away.

"Did you need something else?" The cashier asked.

Her snotty tone jarred Susan out of her shock from the blow off. She replied in a weak voice. "No, thank you. Have a good day."

As she passed the long line she forced herself to look at them, hoping that she could do them the courtesy of a smile, but they all stood eyes forward. No one looked at her before she exited through the glass door.