

HAM AND CHEESE ON CHEAP BREAD

C. McGee

It was grey again. The day. Just like the day before and the day before that. It was the type of grey that filled me with indifference. It didn't make me feel bad, but it sure as hell didn't make me feel good. It was a morning of apathy. It was a morning like any other. The route I took to work was the same. The same route I took every day. The same goddamn cracks in the same goddamn slabs of concrete. Putting one foot in front of the other carried me to work in the same way it had carried me to work for the last seven years. Up the steps of the overpass, over the highway, past the cannery, past the water reclamation plant, and into the parking lot of that faceless office building where I spent five days a week. It wasn't a bad job but it sure as hell wasn't a good job. It was a mediocre job, a job that I didn't enjoy but rather a job that I could stomach. It was a job that I would have quit if I weren't so apathetic, apathetic from the grey, pathetic from the grey, pathetic.

I walked past the receptionist. She was nothing special. Her breasts were beginning to sag and she was developing fat under her arm, the type of fat that would sway back and forth if she would wave goodbye. It made me a little sick to think about. I never waved goodbye to her.

I walked into the room in which my cubicle resided. The cubicle walls used to be black with white trim. The fluorescent lights had faded the black to grey and the oil from people's hands had turned the white trim grey. My cubicle was grey.

I went into my square and sat down. The chair I sat in was made of cloth, stained on the part where the ass goes. I'm not sure what made the stain. I think it was probably the result of the ass sweat of all the people that had used the chair before me. It must have taken a lot of ass sweat to make a stain like that; it made me wonder. How many people had sat in that chair underneath the fluorescent lights, sweat underneath the fluorescent lights, turned grey underneath the fluorescent lights? I would say quite a few.

Bob was turning grey in the cubicle next to me; he didn't know it, but he was. Bob was alright. Well, Bob was alright in small doses. Unfortunately he worked right next to me so I didn't get him in small doses. I got big doses of Bob, nine to five doses of Bob, sometimes even happy hour doses of Bob, too much Bob. I didn't like to look at Bob cause his face bored me. I lowered my chair by using the little lever that's underneath the cushion. When my chair was lower I didn't have to see the top of Bob's head over the cubicle wall. Having my chair at such a low level made it difficult to type, I had to awkwardly raise my arms like a dinosaur. It was worth it.

The keyboard that I typed on was old but I was too lazy to put in an order request for a new one. I dealt with it. The keys were all smudgy and the letters were mostly worn off. I didn't need to see them though; my fingers knew what was what through repetition. On top of its appearance the piece of shit had a bunch of other problems. One of the pegs that slanted the keyboard towards me would occasionally collapse. This resulted in the device teetering back

and forth like a seesaw every time I pressed one of the keys in the upper left-hand corner. Also the H and the A key would stick if they were pushed in rapid succession. Documents that I typed would have hahahahaha randomly inserted into them. It wasn't funny.

My keyboard might have been dirty as shit but I still had a lot of keyboard cleaner. It helped. When I had too much Bob or too much fat secretary or too much cubicle I would have just the right amount of keyboard cleaner. I knew it was a cheap high, a middle school high, but at least it was a high. Sometimes I just needed one. It didn't make the grey go away but at least it distorted it for a second. It made Bob's face less boring. It made the secretary's triceps less disgusting. It made the cubicle less suffocating. It made it all less, if only for a bit.

I had just inhaled some keyboard cleaner when Rick knocked on my cubicle. It annoyed me that he knocked. People shouldn't knock before entering a cubicle. The informal rules that apply to entering a room do not apply to entering a cubicle. But, I couldn't expect a fuckstick like Rick to understand something like that. Rick acted like an east coast, old money, yacht owning ass. I think he was actually from Cleveland, I know that he failed out of community college.

Rick asked if I wanted to grab some lunch. I did, but not with him. I ate lunch with Rick once, that's how I realized he was full of shit. He ordered lobster newburg but it was clear that he should have been ordering chicken fried steak. A fake pompous accent and a cursory knowledge of sailing could only mask his true self for so long.

I told Rick that I couldn't go out to eat with him because I had packed my own lunch. This was true. I had packed my lunch every day since that time I had gone out to eat with him. It was a solid excuse. I knew Rick wouldn't ever bring a sack lunch; it didn't jive with the persona he had created. Eating a crap ham and cheese sandwich by myself was better than eating a decent hot meal with Rick.

My ham and cheese tore as I pulled it out of the plastic bag. I never got it out of the bag in one piece. That cheap bread was too flimsy. I was tired of ham and cheese. I had eaten it every day of work for two months. I didn't mix it up because the closest grocery store to my apartment sold ham in bulk for a real low price.

Sometimes I tried to think about current events while I ate. That didn't usually last long. That stuff didn't affect my day, my grey. It bored me. I usually thought about fucking famous women. It's a pretty good escape. I can't think about it for too long though. If I get a hard on it's difficult to hide in dress pants. Plus, I never know when someone is going to come sit down beside me.

I was thinking about fucking Natalie Portman when Gary and Neal sat down next to me; luckily I only had a semi. They asked me how I was. I gave an obligatory answer. I wished I was still thinking about Natalie Portman.

Gary and Neal were ok. They annoyed me less than other people in the office. I probably would

have liked them if I didn't have to see them five days a week. It was just that they always talked about crap I didn't care about. They were probably in AV club in high school.

I finished my lunch quickly. I don't know why. Sitting with Gary and Neal was a little better than the grey square. Well, maybe not. Anyways, I went back to the cubicle after I finished my ham and cheese. I typed for a while but then my arms got tired from awkwardly raising them. I lifted the seat so I could type easier but then I had to look at the top of Bob's head so I lowered it again. I inhaled some keyboard cleaner and took a nap.

I awoke to Bob knocking on my cubicle. Fucking Bob. He said we should duck out early and grab a drink. This was nothing new. We ducked out early every Friday. It meant I had to go to the bar with Bob but it also meant I got to leave the cubicle early.

We walked to the bar down the street. It was the closest bar to the office. It was also along the route I took home. I didn't really have a choice. I had to drink there. I walked in and sat down. Bob pulled up the stool next to me and ordered a rum and diet. That annoyed me. Rum and diet is a drink that should only be ordered by thin females. Bob was not a female and even more certainly he was not thin. What a dick.

The bartender gave me a scotch neat. I didn't have to ask, she knew. I wasn't quite a regular but I wasn't a stranger. She had perky tits, the bartender. Her nose was big though. I usually flirted with her a little bit but I always thought better of it. I didn't want it to go too far. She wasn't worth it. Sometimes she was disgusting. Flirting with those fat middle-aged pieces of shit. And for what? A tip. It was turning her grey. She wasn't working under fluorescent lights but she was still losing color. It was making her that way, the job, the people, the day, the night, the routine, the being. I wondered if she noticed?

I ordered more scotch and tried not to think about it. The scotch helped. Just like the keyboard cleaner but for longer. Still, the warmth provided by the scotch wasn't free. It hurt to lift the glass to my lips. My elbows were sore. Sore from typing like a dinosaur, sore from Bob, sore from doing the same shit. I drank more despite the pain. It was worth it.

The bartender kept on bringing me scotch. The first couple times she came over I just stared at her tits. Eventually I started to talk to her, flirt with her, just a bit. She and the scotch got better with each glass. We talked for longer with every successive drink she brought over. She was ok. She said some halfway interesting stuff about music and film, about life and love. We were talking when it happened. When I realized it. She was onto it. She was onto the grey.

I knew it from her face. There was a moment, a moment when her face showed it all. One of the fat fucks at the bar yelled at her to get a drink and it was then that I caught a glimpse. It only lasted a second. By the time she turned around it was gone. But I saw it. I saw that she saw. She walked over to the fat fuck called him honey and asked what he wanted to drink. She didn't miss a beat. I got up and walked to the can.

I peed. I peed for a long time and I thought. I thought she couldn't know. Nobody knew like I did. Everyone was blind, some willingly, some ignorantly, but all blind. I bought a condom from the machine on the wall just in case she wasn't blind. I put my quarters in and bought a magnum. I threw it away and bought a regular. I walked back to my seat.

We started talking again. The words went with ease back and forth. It wasn't forced, it wasn't awkward; it was easy. For a second I let myself believe it. I let myself believe she really understood. Then it happened. She showed herself, her true self. She didn't really understand the grey. She played the grey or at least the people in it. She gave herself away in one sentence. I asked for another. She said 'sure honey, what can I get you'. I laid down my money and left.

Honey. She called me honey. Exactly what she called all the balding fat fuck middle age pieces of shit that sat at the bar. If she really saw she would have known. She would have known that I did too. She was disgusting. She was the same.

I headed home. I walked underneath the streetlights. I walked past the water reclamation plant, past the cannery, over the highway, and towards the steps that would carry me down the overpass. Then something different happened. I tripped. I tripped on one of those goddamn cracks in one of those goddamn slabs of concrete. I reached for the handrail but my sore elbow wouldn't extend. I fell. Hard. One step after another. My body made a sound with every step it hit, each wonderfully different than the last. I landed hard, in a distorted mess at the base of the steps. I opened my eyes and there was red. Everywhere red. Bright red, violent red, beautiful red. I smiled.

THE END!