



A small sore about the size of a pomegranate seed has sprouted inside Alex's mouth. It will grow and transform him into someone he doesn't recognize. His tongue is thick and dry as he wakes up hung over from drinking last night with his roommate. They both work at Cheers but Larry's a prep cook so he's probably already there chopping vegetables and pounding ground beef into patties. Alex's shift doesn't start until ten when he'll go in and get the bar ready for the lunch crowd. The Tucson sun comes through the kitchen window in painful shards. It's probably close to a hundred degrees outside already. Alex has to move the remains of the Larry's sushi experiment off to the side so he can get to the coffeemaker.

Larry never cleans up his sushi experiments. Fleshy pieces of uncooked bacon are on the counter and the FryDaddy stands greasy and silent nearby. There's just enough Bailey's left for a cup of coffee so Alex makes a morning drink and rolls a jailhouse cigarette. There's nothing edible in the apartment other than condiments. Alex will end up going to work early and stealing some food from the walk-in cooler before his shift. His typical

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breakfast is a dinner roll with hunks of cheese he hides in his apron pocket or sometimes bar fruit left over from the night before.

Alex feels the sore as soon as he takes his first sip of coffee. It feels like someone put a match out on his gum. He goes to the bathroom mirror and sees a small red spot on his lower gum. He tries a small sip of cold water and the result is as painful as the coffee. He tries to convince himself it isn't mouth cancer that it must be a canker sore or maybe an allergic reaction from eating too many pineapple wedges and gets ready for his shift.

He took the job at Cheers when he found out that a degree in Fine Arts qualified him to work in either retail or food service. The only painters being hired were house painters. Cheers is a typical bar and grill restaurant named after the television show and it features menu items named after the characters. They have the Norm-Burger and Woody Wings. He started as a busboy but was promoted to daytime bartender after a month because employee turnover is so high that after a couple weeks he was the veteran of the waitstaff. It isn't a pleasant job and the money isn't good either and that's the joke he tells people, "Yeah, the job sucks but at least the money's shitty."

Cheers is Alex's first job since college. Within a month of receiving his degree, he withdrew the remainder of his student loan money, filled the gas tank of his five-year old Mazda and fled the Midwest college town for Arizona. His cousin, Shelly, works at the Plum Tree apartment complex in Tucson so he knew he'd at least have a place to stay when he got there which was more

than any other city had to offer. Shelly and Alex have never been close but since their mothers are sisters she helped him into a little one-bedroom apartment where she works.

During his first weeks in Tucson, before he met anyone else, he would go over to her apartment and have margaritas with her. This is a ritual he found that everyone does when they first move to the Southwest. Drink margaritas. After a couple months tequila loses its allure and he began to see margaritas as a specialty drink for the tourists and the newly transplanted. A sort of rite of passage. The real drinkers of Tucson don't drink margaritas. They drink cheap beer, vodka and whiskey like the rest of America. Shelly's apartment was decorated in pastel floral patterns. It smelled of candles and potpourri. She was three years older than Alex and wanted to be a wife or an interior designer. She would watch those decorating shows on television and her apartment had throw pillows and little collections of novelties grouped together on tables and shelves. She called these groupings "Areas of interest." On one shelf, a pinecone sits with a ceramic quail and a tin sun. On another, a turquoise coyote howls at an invisible moon next to basket with globs of shiny plastic in it. Alex thought they looked like dioramas from a universe with no rules. A universe where baskets and coyotes cohabitate and quail collect pinecones for winter.

Alex's own apartment has two plastic lawn chairs in the living room with a TV and a stereo sitting on a plank of wood with concrete blocks beneath it. Ashtrays are scattered around on the floors like land mines. In the bedroom he sleeps on an air mattress designed

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for campers that don't like to sleep on rocks. If Shelly's apartment was sponsored by Bed and Bath Essentials, Alex's was sponsored by Joe's Hardware Store. Before he drove out from the Midwest he sold everything that didn't fit in the car, not that he owned a lot as a college student. Larry didn't really bring much when he moved in either: a futon mattress that he sleeps on in the living room, some posters, three boxes of cooking ware and a garbage bag full of clothes.

Alex didn't plan or particularly want a roommate but after three months working at Cheers he couldn't afford the apartment by himself. He had used the last two hundred dollars of his student loan to get the utilities on, the ounce of pot he brought from college was smoked down to seeds and stems and his credit card bills were hitting every other week. Regular cigarettes cost too much so he started rolling his own prison cigarettes with Top tobacco for ten bucks a can. Boxes of wine were the cheapest booze he could find and as far as food went, he stuck with potatoes and eggs, bought bread past its expiration date, two loaves for a dollar, to go with his Good Choice peanut butter. The apartment always smelled like a diner from the eggs, fried potatoes and ashtrays. Even with all the cut corners he was getting poorer by the hour and his credit cards were growing on their own accord like a virus of late fees and percentage rates.

He told Shelly that he couldn't afford a one-bedroom on the tips from Cheers but that he knew a guy from work that needed a roommate. Alex added that Larry was single even though he knew Larry and her would never hit it off. She pulled some strings in the

office and got Larry's name added to the lease. Though Alex and Larry don't have much in common other than poverty and love of being drunk, at least the rent was cut in half.

Larry has corporate aspirations and believes in the "think positive" paradigm, typically reserved for real estate people and car salesmen. He is disgustingly optimistic with his inspiration posters tacked to the walls of their living room with their oversized titles like, "Perseverance" or "Determination" and photographs of mountain peaks or marathon runners. He wants to work his way up to chef at Cheers then manager so he can integrate his own concoctions into the nation-wide menu and create his own signature brand. He has developed a line of appetizers that he calls American Sushi. American Sushi is basically the standard appetizer fare, potato skins, chicken strips and jalapeno peppers deep fried and wrapped in bacon but sliced so it looks vaguely like real sushi. Part of being Larry's roommate is that Alex becomes the taste tester for Larry's American Sushi experiments. The FryDaddy waits on the counter for the weekend when Larry brings home a case of beer and heats up the vat of grease. The experiments go something like this:

"Is this a fried hot dog?" Alex asks.

"Yeah, what do think?" Larry wants to know.

"It's fucking hot," Alex says.

"Yeah, guess there should be a little cooling time before they're served."

"I'd say," Alex agrees.

"But how's it taste?"

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Alex then tries to offer feedback and compares it to the previous versions, “Well, the bacon helps hide the hot dog taste but it’s not quite as good as the cheese ones.”

Larry nods the information somewhere away in his mind in a recipe book that only he can read.

The Cheers franchise likes to call itself a “conceptual restaurant.” The whole experience is supposed to revolve around the stupid lyric line about going where everyone knows your name. It’s made worse by the company’s insistence on customers wearing nametags so the staff can pretend to be on a first name basis with them. The clientele consists mostly of tourists who haven’t seen the chain before but for some reason liked the television show. They come in wearing t-shirts with embroidered cacti and geckos on them and before the hostess seats them she gives each a little adhesive nametag they fill out and stick to their shirts. As an employee Alex is required to address all the customers by the name stuck to their shirt. “Hey, Mary, what can I get you tonight?” It’s often hard to read the names they’ve written on the stickers. More often the greeting is something like, “Hey, uh, (squint) Jubilee? Oh, Jenny Lee, what can I get you?” The tourists are better than the occasional packs of salesmen who think they’re jokesters and make up their own names, “Hey, Big Cock, what can I get you?”

Alex goes to work the morning the sore sprouted in his mouth and tries not to think about things like oral syphilis and flesh-eating bacteria. The daytime bartending routine at Cheers starts with filling the ice bins and chopping up fruit for the various drink garnishes.

Limes for gin and the margaritas, lemon strips for the martinis, a couple wedges of pineapple for the rare pina colada. One of the cooks comes up to the bar while he is slicing the fruit. Dave is wearing his cook-white apron over his cook-white shirt, he always reminds Alex of one the Marx Brothers, the one with the horn, except not as happy. And he can talk.

“Hey, Alex, you clear this yet?” he says, his arm is hooked over the bar. His hand is on the gun of the soda dispenser.

“No, not yet,” he tells him.

Alex leaves the coke gun in its holster. The holster has a tube that drains into the bowels somewhere deep beneath the restaurant. He presses and holds one of the buttons. This is what’s known as clearing the line. The sound that clearing the line makes is Thrusssssh-Thunk-Thrusssssssh-Thunk-Thrusssssh....

Alex has to clear the line every morning because at night roaches crawl up into the tubes and bask in the sugar coated darkness. Sometimes he and Dave bet on how many will be flushed out. They didn’t this Saturday, he tells Dave a joke instead. The punch line is, “I know, but it keeps eating my popcorn.”

Dave laughs a little, shakes his curly Marx brother head and goes back to the kitchen with his cockroach-free drink. Alex finishes the bar prep with about fifteen minutes before they open the doors for lunch. He remembers reading that gargling with saline solution is supposed to help heal oral infections. He knows that saline solution is really just salt water so he fills a tumbler up with warm tap water from the sink, shakes in a table-

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spoon of margarita salt and stirs it around until the salt chunks dissolve. He takes the tumbler to the bathroom to gargle in private.

Leaning over the sink he takes a big swig of the foggy gray solution. He thinks he'll swish it around in his mouth before gargling to let it coat the inside of his cheeks and gums but it doesn't happen this way. As soon as salt water hits the spot on his gum where the sore is, a blinding pain sears like a scribble of electricity across the right side of his face. He has no choice, his body forces him to spit it back out into the sink. He breaks out into a sweat and his eyes are watering when Dave walks in.

"You all right?" he asks.

Alex isn't ready to talk about the sore yet, "Yeah, I'm okay."

Dave laughs and goes into one of the bathroom stalls.

It probably looked to Dave as if Alex had just done a line of coke or something off the porcelain sink because his eyes are red and watering and he's sweating. Alex lets him assume drugs rather than some contagious and potentially deadly gum-eating virus.