Sunday morning

The coffee dripped into the stained pots the exact same way it did every morning. I filled the ice bucket and unwrapped pastries left over from yesterday that we would serve to customers today. The sun was just coming up but I had been up since five. Today was Sunday and the best day to be here. Everyone was at Church or sleepily ignoring God and we would be slow until noon, but I got to work with Paul and Cassie, and we would play the game.

"So, do you use the pill then? You seem like a pill girl," Paul leaned against the counter and stared at Cassie who erupted into delighted childish giggles. Paul never did any work, but was very entertaining.

"You can't ask me that, psycho," she blushed and kept wiping the same spot on the counter. Her shirt was so tight the words stretched across her chest distortedly: I'm a Virgin: but this is an old shirt. She had seen it on Britney Spears in a tabloid and had to get one.

"Mary," Paul turned to me, "what do you think? Pill?"

"Definitely, very traditional," I took Cassie's rag from her, she wasn't doing much with it, and went to clear the one customer's table. He'd been a wet cappuccino, extra foam, Cassie had got that one. I'm not sure how she did it. I think she guessed based on people's clothes; Paul guessed based on their faces.

The next guy who came in was tall and thin, with conservative clothes, and a big nose. He came up the walkway with his hands close to his sides.

"Latte, Large," Paul guessed before the guy reached the door.
"Nooo," Cassie eyed his ironed shirt, "Americano, no milk."

The tall guy pulled open the door, glanced immediately at me with my mousy hair, and then instantaneously at Cassie's shirt. I knew it. "Carmel Mocciato," I whispered as he peered into the pastry case, "and a biscotti." The guy needed something sweet.

As Paul wrapped up the biscotti, I happily gave the tall guy his change, and pocketed the tip.

"So, what should my major be?" Cassie asked me. "Communications?"

"I don't know, who do you want to communicate with?" Cassie had just come out of high school with a surprisingly good GPA. "Where do you want to go to school again?"

"I don't know," she eyed Paul as he moved chairs around to look busy, "maybe Cal State."

I didn't say a thing. The bell over the door rang; our heads snapped up. A Policeman; cute, shiny badge.

"Large coffee to go, black." Cassie beat me to it.

Paul ran over, "Large Black!"

"She already got it." I walked over to the register to help him.

"Damn. I need gas money." Paul hardly every got one; he clung to false hope.

"I'll split it with you, Paul."

"Cool." Paul watched the officer drop a dollar into the jar, "Thanks." Cassie smiled at Paul as the officer turned to the door and burned his tongue.

"I'm gonna take my ten, Mary, OK?" Paul asked.

"Sure, you deserve it."
Cassie helped me fill the sugar as Paul read his airplane manuals. "So if I go to Cal State," she unscrewed all the lids, "maybe, I can be a journalist in the area or something."

"Do you want to be a journalist in the area?" I poured the sugar in up to the tops and she screwed the lids back on.

"Sure, I mean, I gotta do something."

"Yeah, I guess you gotta do something."

"How did you know what you wanted to do, Mary? How did you know you wanted to be a vet?"

"I don't know," I thought about it. I couldn't remember a time when I didn't want to be a vet. I guess some people aren't so lucky.

"Did you always want to help animals?"

"Yeah, they can't help themselves. I guess I just always knew, like how you always win the game, like how you almost always know what people want to drink, you know? You just know."

"You win sometimes, too," Cassy wiped up the sugar from the counter. Paul glanced at his watch.

"Not as much as you, you're really good at it, maybe you should think about psychology or something." We put the sugars on all the tables but Paul's. "Cassie?"

"Yeah?"

"Why are you going to Cal State?" We moved around the room. "You could get into any school in the country."

"Hey!" Paul looked up as we passed his table, "I go to Cal State! Right on!"
Cassie smiled. I moved behind the counter to stir the soup; she followed me. "Do you think it's a bad idea?" She asked. A customer was coming up the walk, only the fourth that morning.

I hesitated, "Yeah, Cassie, I do. I think . . .," the bell rang, an old man walked in, "you could do a lot more than be a journalist."

"Double espresso?" She asked me.

"Yep."

The guy folded his newspaper neatly. "Can I have . . ." he stared up at the menu, his brow creased, "I guess . . . a double espresso, long shot."

I smiled and rang him up.

The morning passed quickly. Cassie was on the ball; Paul got one, but we had been in the back doing dishes so maybe he was lying. Toward noon I hung up my towel and I started to take my apron off, but the air hung stale, and I left it on for some reason. It was lunch time and I had no appetite. The bell rang. We hadn't seen her coming. Paul was cleaning; Cassie was talking to him about journalism, but we all froze, unsure of ourselves.

The woman was too small and undernourished, not white, but gray. She had a suitcase and a backpack and bright pink lipstick. She stood in the doorway.

"Can I help you?" Paul asked.

She smiled without teeth and the smell that came off of her filled the room. Something like cement and urine covered grass. Her blue parka was zipped up and filthy; I hoped she didn't unzip it. I was at a loss for what kind of drink she would want.

She walked up to the counter and Cassie met her. "Can I get you something?"
"How much is a cup of hot water?" I could barely hear her from where I stood. Her lips were so weathered they cracked when she talked.

"I suppose it's free. Water's free, isn't it?" Cassie turned toward me, and so did the little woman.

Free? No! I wanted to look away; I wanted her to go back outside; I wanted her to take a bath and eat something so that her sunken face wouldn't haunt me, so that her smell wouldn't take away from the coffee: Brazilian, espresso, Italian roast, none of it was strong enough anymore. "It's a quarter."

Cassie stared at me, so did Paul. The small woman reached in her bag, took out papers and spoons and her face fell. She smiled at me knowingly, and put her spoons back in her bag. She turned toward the tables and began to wheel her suitcase over.

"You have to buy something to sit here," I said. She turned around, "it's management's policy, not mine." It was not.

"Wait!" Cassie reached in her apron pocket and drew out a quarter, "my treat." She dropped it into the register, and Paul filled up a cup of hot water and handed it to the woman. She watched me while she sipped carefully; they all watched me.

I went into the back and punched out for lunch. I took off my apron and went outside. Cassie came meet me as I sat down on the curb. "What happened in there, Mary? Why did you charge that woman?" I watched the traffic zoom by; a Cadillac, a Toyota, an old VW bug; I tried to guess what kind of coffee each one would have; nothing came to mind.