

Eleven After Life

It was approximately eleven after Life when she wandered in.

The night shift was the best shift, at least to the three that worked at the diner at The End.

It allowed the cook to wear earbuds while he worked, for the dishwasher to take a nap when work was slow, and for the waitress to draw in her sketchbook.

The customer was no one particularly special. An average woman wearing plain, if not boring, attire. A short-sleeved beige button down deeply fused with a light pair of blue jeans to encapsulate the personality of dull. She sat at a table meant for two and asked for one cup of decaffeinated coffee. As the waitress poured the fresh, steaming beverage, the woman asked her, "Where am I?"

The waitress shrugged. "Where you're supposed to be, I assume."

"No," the woman shook her head. "I don't know this place; I've never been here before."

"I know," the waitress replied evenly. "And as I said, you are where you're supposed to be." She set a small pitcher of creamer and a few packets of sugar on the round pine table and turned to walk away.

"Wait!" the woman nearly shot out of her seat. "May I have a pen and a napkin, please?"

The waitress gave the distraught, paste-skinned woman the extra pen she always carried on her and took a few napkins out of the pocket of her apron, then promptly returned to the kitchen.

"They're always so *jittery*," she remarked to the cook.

He was preparing a small meal for himself, and as he flipped a hash-brown, he replied coolly,

"She'll calm down eventually." His gruff accent was muffled by the thick black mustache that grew on his upper lip like an invasive ivy.

"True that," she glanced at a sink full of thick, popping bubbles. "Are they on a break?"

"They're having a snack. I made them pancakes."

The waitress nodded and wandered back out to the dining room to check on the woman at the table. She was scribbling on the napkins, looking confused and nervous.

"More coffee?" the waitress asked.

"I can't remember," the woman whispered. Her voice was shaky, as were her skeletal hands.

"Can't remember what?"

"It." She shook her head. "It was important."

The waitress departed to grab the coffee pot, but when she returned the woman had her wallet out and was sorting out what had been inside. Credit cards, debit cards, business cards, receipts, all of them scattered out on the tabletop. She silently refilled the mug and meandered to the break room.

This one may take a while, she thought.

Her name was Marilyn Winsor. She lived on 23 Pine Street in Somerville, Maine. She was a businesswoman and owned a small mechanical store that specialized in motorcycle repair. She had a family. Her husband's name was John, her son's name was Robin, and her daughter's name was Rose. Her business card read, "Marilyn's Mechanics, the Best Prices in the State of Maine!"

Marilyn stared down at a picture in her hands. It was the four of them during one of Rose's most recent trips home from college. She could see strands of silver in her own auburn hair, while her husband's had transformed from pitch black to mostly grey by the time he was forty-four. The class ring on Robin's hand was half concealed by the collar of Rose's shirt.

She's five and her father leaves her and her mother on their own. They struggle for the next seven years and barely make it by.

She's nineteen and meets John at a mutual friend's graduation party.

She's twenty-five and they've been married for three years when she tells him that she is pregnant with their first child.

She's still twenty-five when she loses the baby.

She's thirty-one while John is chasing Robin around the yard when a teenager down the street dies in a hit-and run. Explaining death to a three-year-old is hard. Even harder still is attending the funeral.

She's thirty-three when Rose is born. Robin is skeptical of his new baby sister at first because he is used to being an only child, but comes to love and cherish her within a few months. From that point on he was always overprotective of her in the best way possible, checking on her after every cry, cough, and chuckle.

She's thirty-five when their beloved dog, Ozzy, almost dies in their backyard after a fight with a neighboring dog that got loose. It was then that Robin told her "I want to save animals when I grow up" and Marilyn had never been prouder.

She's forty when her mother dies.

She's forty-two when Robin comes home with a black eye after a fight in school where some bullies targeted his best friend.

She's days away from fifty when Rose comes out, nervous and shaking during Christmas break:

"I'm gay."

"Oh..."

"I already packed and Robin said—"

"What do you mean you packed?"

"..."

"Go unpack, you're not going anywhere"

"Marilyn..."

"What? We're not. She's our daughter, we're not kicking her out of this house over something as small as this. It's not like she murdered anyone!"

She's fifty-two when her best friend dies of cancer.

She's fifty-four when Robin finishes veterinary school with honors.

She's fifty-seven when she signs her store over to a new owner. A bright young woman with a vast future ahead of her. Marilyn is extremely pleased with her decision.

She's sixty-two when she is diagnosed with bone cancer.

She's sixty-five when she beats it.

She's seventy-one when it comes back as brain cancer.

She's seventy-two when-

"I'm dead."

"Yes." The waitress had been observing Marilyn from the counter at the front of the diner. She put her hand on Marilyn's shoulder and gave a comforting, at least to the best of her ability, pat.

"Is this—is this all there is?"

"This is the night shift," she shrugged.

"The night shift?" Marilyn repeated dubiously.

“This is where those without faith come when their time ends,” she explained. “You get choices.”

“What choices?”

“You were a relatively good person. You weren’t perfect, but no human ever really is. You can go to an afterlife of solitary time in a house with a garden, books, and music that are all just okay.” She handed Marilyn a pamphlet with the words *Mediocrity in a House* printed across the top in bright yellow letters. “Or you can try again. If you pick this,” she tapped the pamphlet, “ask me for the check.”

“What if I want to try again?” It did look appealing in a sort of calm way. An eternity of calm repose. Like doing yoga for eternity. But bad, faux Indian guru yoga, like John’s best friend’s daughter’s sort of yoga.

“Then go help the dishwasher in the back.”

Marilyn glanced up at her. The waitress was warmly lit in a strange way. Deep, red-brown skin, oak brown eyes, and her hair tied in dozens of braids that were pulled back in a low ponytail. Over her shoulder, Marilyn could see the cook. A buff man with a large beer gut, he was hovering over the stove, although Marilyn could not see if he was cooking. He wore a stained white tank top and several large tattoos that resembled snakes on his withering skin could be seen on his back and arms.

“What’s his afterlife?” she questioned.

“Not an option for you,” she said. Marilyn decided that was probably something she didn’t want to know, based on the waitress’s tone.

“How long do I have to decide?”

“Until the night shift ends.”

Marilyn glanced outside. She must have been there for hours but the sky was still the same inky black.

“Do you want any more coffee?” The waitress held up the pot.

Marilyn shook her head and the waitress nodded and retreated to the kitchen. She read the pamphlet twice. The clock on the wall never changed. She drank another cup of coffee, and, remembering Rose’s worries about her health, had a bowl of fruit. She couldn’t really say if they had any taste. If any of it had any taste.

With a final glance outside, she picked up her empty mug and bowl and headed into the kitchen. The cook barely regarded her except to point at the sink full of bubbles where the dishwasher stood. They were of undeterminable age, gender, or ethnicity. Everything about them seemed average, and yet utterly exotic. Their head was bowed, hair tucked tightly under

a baseball cap, arms plunged into the sink. A heavy-duty apron was tied tightly to keep water from soaking their clothes.

They silently pointed with spindly fingers at a second apron on a hook.

Marilyn set the two dishes down of the edge of the massive sink and put on the apron. The dishwasher shuffled slightly to make room. Marilyn rolled up her sleeves and began to wash dishes.

The clock on the wall changed.

The night shift was coming to an end.