

Tip Jar

Molly came home from work so tired that every tendon ached, throwing her keys on the shoe cabinet and her coat on the hook. Whoever thinks waitressing is an easy job is absolutely nuts. Thank God I have the day off tomorrow. Now, if I could just find this goddamn ring. She knew that she didn't have energy to waste panicking—she did plenty of that this morning three steps out of the doorway when she realized that her left ring finger was bare.

One hour. You can do this, Molly. One hour. One hour.

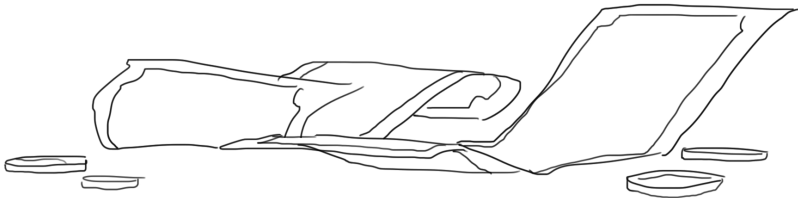
As the big hand of the kitchen clock drew nearer, it became her mantra. She felt her body forget all about being tired; energy coursed through her. She knew what would happen when Martin came home if he found out that she lost the engagement ring he had worked so hard to pick out.

She retraced her steps, starting in the bedroom, from the moment she woke up until leaving for work at 7 a.m. Molly worked at two establishments: Linda's and the Hawaii Tiki Hut, where the food and decorations are so cheesy that the only regulars are yearly tourists visiting their second cousins and looking for a laugh. Apparently every restaurant in Louisiana except the Hawaiian Tiki Hut is named after someone or another. She would work Linda's, a small-town breakfast joint where she knew everyone's order and the owner loved her, in the morning and brunch, then waitress the Tiki Hut in the evenings, where the manager made it clear that he did not like her or her habit of sneaking leftover food off of finished plates. It wasn't her fault that she didn't have time for an elegant dinner.

She glanced over at two wedding magazines on her nightstand, mailed to her with highlights and post-its inside. Despite her mother's crooning over them, it was already almost the end of October; nothing would be ready in time for a spring wedding

unless she paid thousands of dollars, and no one wants a sweaty, sticky summer wedding, and she couldn't plan much until the holiday season was over with the work rush anyway. She told her mother this several times whenever she called. She didn't even live in the state, but Molly knew her mother would find a way to be as involved as possible.

Molly started going through the drawers in her nightstand, bottom to top; she remembered that's how robbers did it, according to the internet article she read. That way you didn't have to close and reopen. *It is faster*, she thought, but no luck. She crawled on the surrounding floor, then the bed. She remembered taking the ring off last night and putting it on in the morning, but she didn't trust herself. Martin was always saying that she couldn't remember things. Did she leave it in the bathroom when she took a shower? She rummaged through the hair products and facial cleansers and beautifying creams she used religiously. If she was a thief, at least she wouldn't care about what state she left the house in.



She emptied out her entire purse, her cut of the tips earned earlier that day spilling onto the floor, and reassembled it. It was tattered from everything she put it through, tossed in greasy corners of the restaurants' kitchen floors, tucked in sticky baskets of grocery carts, thrown on the couch at the end of a long day. There hadn't been a night out for her to wish for a nicer bag in a long time.

There was only one room left to search: the kitchen. It had to be there. It had to. She risked a glance at the clock—fifteen minutes left until Martin got off of work. It'd only take him a few minutes to drive home, especially with the reckless way he drove. *It's okay. I'm fine. It'll be alright. It has to be here.* She moved everything away from the blue backsplash, scouring every inch of the countertop. She rummaged in the fridge, opened the microwave, even checked the crumb tray of the toaster. *Did I swallow the thing?! Oh god, Martin...*

Wait! Martin had said last night that the dishes needed to be done...

Molly rushed to the kitchen sink and dove her arm into the drain. *Please, God, if you're really there...* She clutched something hard between the stringy mucks stuck to the sides of the pipe and gasped, pulling out the engagement ring. She cried out in relief, only to notice what sat next to the sink.

A lifetime ago, she took the old pickle jar outside to start her lemonade stand; frayed bits of white label still clung to the glass. Her love of travel had started early, but she knew that travel costs money. The jar was about the size of her head at that age, which she figured should be plenty to hold a trip to the bridges of Prague or the riverside of Paris or the beaches of Palma. Her mother said that the most scumdilliumpshest lemonade would make the most tips, and how could she not make the best summer lemonade in Louisiana, since she was the most scumdilliumpshest girl? She missed her. There were a few bills in the jar when she had added to it this morning, but it had been mostly a pile of tarnished coins that needed to be rolled.

Now, there were only some shards and a handful of coins strewn across the counter. The yellow “Europe Trip” sticky note had flown to the floor.

Water brewed behind her eyes as she picked up a few stray

coins from the linoleum and went to the cupboard adjacent to the kitchen. Molly couldn't hold back the tears anymore as she brushed the broken glass into the dustpan. *How could he do this?* Suddenly, she jerked the shards into the trash bin with a roar.

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When Martin got home, the streetlights had been burning for hours. He felt no guilt; he could go out for a beer or three with his buddies and ogle at the waitresses without telling her. She didn't need to know his every move.

"Babe?" He heard a floorboard creak in the bedroom. *What was she doing up this late?* Alcohol always elevated his anger, but he didn't care. The closet was open, the middle section of her side empty. He yanked open the garage door to find the old Chevy he had been renovating was missing. The sound of a plane rush overhead made his head throb. He clenched his teeth.

When she comes back, I swear to God, how dare that slut...

He slammed the door shut.

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32,000 miles above Louisiana, Molly felt fucking elated, a carry-on above her head and a crumpled wad of ones and fives poking out of her old purse.

She was going to see a real beach.

by Alex Candage