

A picture in my mom's house shows me standing in a black McDonald's uniform. Well, mostly black. The hat was maroon. But you don't get to wear all maroon until you're sixteen. Because you don't WEAR maroon. You EARN maroon.

What you can't see in the picture is what the uniform is made of. Not quite plastic, not quite fabric, all about discomfort. It's not even real clothing. But maybe comfort is a distant second to finding some kind of material you can spill an entire grease trap on without it mutating into a saturated mess of old burger and egg.

Or maybe they just like the colors.

Either way, any fashion statement you might have made is destroyed by the fact that you'll be purchasing special No-Slip shoes. They're black, they're blocky, and they look like something that a kid with clubfoot wears to school. They have a honeycomb pattern on the bottom that is supposed to save you from death by pratfall.

And so dressed, it was off to work.

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The first few days were the worst. It makes sense when you consider that your first day, even if you quit that afternoon, is the furthest you will be from finished with your McDonald's career.

The entire first day is about trying to figure out what the hell is going on. You're standing on the line, ready to assemble an Egg McMuffin. The screen lights up and it says SBECH. SBECH? What the fuck is a Sbech? What is a BEC? None of these are items I've ever even heard of in all my years of attending McDonald's, essentially all of my years of life. To make things worse, you start discovering that McDonald's offers items that you would never think to order at McDonald's. B&G hits the screen and Diane sighs. Diane is an older lady who's been working there a couple years but makes it seem like it's been her whole life. She hates putting up with new employees, wears about thirty McDonald's pins on her hat, and talks big about KFC offering her eight bucks an hour to trade in her creepy clown mascot for a racist Southern plantation owner. On the plus, she swung things to get her daughter a job. Her daughter is medium-hot and is one of three female employees who insist on wearing tight black pants, the kind that you see every restaurant hostess wearing. It helps pass the time between fry baskets

Diane slogs to the back where she dips a ladle into a cauldron. She slogs a load of gray mush on top of a biscuit that's ripped in half.

B&G. Biscuits and Gravy.

There are a couple other weird ones to learn about. Cajun Chicken. The Cajun Chicken is sort of like the regular chicken sandwich, but it's redder and gets its own

sauce. I don't recommend getting the Cajun chicken unless you can be fairly sure that at least ten have been ordered in the previous day. The Cajun sauce gun doesn't get changed out too often.

Pancakes are available all day. It's a huge pain in the ass, and I don't recommend doing it at the same McDonald's more than once. But it's an option.

Learning the register is its own set of problems. McDonald's is famous for pioneering the practice of displaying pictures on its registers instead of numbers. Any idiot can punch the picture of the thing they want. It's true. But that screen can't possibly offer up all the options on the initial interface. You end up with layered windows, each button opening another Russian nesting doll filled with burgers and fried globs of chicken. And god only knows where some of the shit's going to be. Where is an All-American Meal? Senior Coffee? Happy meal toy purchased without Happy Meal?

There was this one moment, maybe two days in, when the lines were cleared out. Nobody was standing waiting. I turned my back on the lobby and leaned on the counter. One of the managers, Mark, who always wore a tie and mustache, laughed. He said, This is funny. And I heard one of the classic work phrases that would haunt me the rest of my life:

Time to lean is time to clean.

There are so many other perfectly good rhymes they could have used. Time to lean is time to preen. Time to rest is always best. Take five, maybe stay alive by not jamming your head in the fryer. Or bee hive.

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Everyone remembers something about McDonald's. Sometimes it's the woman who spilled hot coffee in her crotch. This resulted in \$500,000 in the woman's pocket. That's about two days of McDonalds' coffee sales, by the way. It also resulted in HOT!HOT!HOT!HOT! printed around the rim of each coffee cup.

Tamac was the only person who burned himself enough to go home while I was there. It wasn't the grill or the fryer. He spilled a pot of coffee on his arm. The skin around his arm tightened. It blushed a deep red, the color as though the coffee had burned the skin away and his muscles were exposed and roasting. Steam curled away. The coffee is that hot because you can stretch coffee grounds further that way.

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“Put down extra Filet. It's raining.”

Filet O' Fish is probably the strangest phenomenon in the whole of the place. The thing is, it's not a big seller. Churchy people will eat it on Fridays, but otherwise you don't move a lot of Filet. Filet O' Fish is another one to avoid unless you have reason to believe they've been selling big over the last day or so. Mayonnaise, Cajun Sauce, Big Mac Sauce, and Tartar Sauce are all shot onto buns with modified caulking guns. If you come into the back and smell a rotting something, odds are it's the Tartar Sauce cartridge, which probably hasn't been changed or chilled for a week.

But if you're into Filet O' Fish, there's a silver lining. For some reason, Filet O' Fish really moves on cloudy days. Even more if raindrops hit pavement. Don't ask me to explain it. It's you people eating them, not me. I wouldn't eat that shit with YOUR mouth.

\$

Everyone remembers something about McDonalds. Before working there, it was driving through with my dad. He never ordered fries, but he would always pull three or four slender fries from the bottom of the bag and eat them. He said the same thing always, "Just testing for poison."

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Here, for information purposes, is a listing and description of some of the different types of customers you will find at your local McDonald's:

Builders: 99-cent Value Burgers have fueled folks through tough times. And we're happy to pull off the onions, give you an extra shot of mustard, or do just about any number of things. But Builders push things to the limit. "I'll have a double cheeseburger. Add tomato, add bacon, add extra cheese, add..." These motherfuckers are the reason you have to pay per topping when you order pizza. It's all thanks to them and their plan of, "Could you make a burger and on top of it another entire burger in its own wrapper?" Assholes.

the Collector: Once in a while McDonald's gets an idea. Like putting Inspector Gadget toys in the Happy Meals. But what if, instead of eight separate toys, there were eight toys that all form together to make one really great toy?

This is sort of what they did, but instead of eight toys morphing into one awesome toy, they made it so that eight pieces of garbage vaguely attached to create something that would allow you to throw it in a dumpster in one fell swoop while your son is gone at a sleepover. Great business plan, especially when you don't have to deal with the Collector, usually a mom, who insists on knowing when the next toy is coming out, why you're going in a particular order, and so on. This often goes pretty far. From time to time you would pick up the phone and hear a hassled voice on the other end. "Hey, this is 8th Ave. Do you guys have any number 5's left?"

I understand this is frustrating as a parent, but please understand that I am (barely) trained to put bread and meat on a wrapper, let alone mentally divine a schedule for the release of shitty toys.

Plus, Inspector Gadget is dogshit.

Freshies: These are the people who always want to know if it's fresh. Sometimes they come up with clever tricks to make sure it is, like asking for fries with no salt, which they have learned means cooking up a brand new batch. It's not that big a deal, but you are one ballsy motherfucker if you ask for fries without salt and then ask for salt packets when you get to the drive-up window.

It's McDonald's. No, it's not fresh.

Filet-No-Mustards: Just about every workplace has something like this going on. If you are an attractive woman, maybe you've caught onto something like this. In our case, it was the Filet-No-Mustard system.

Say a pretty girl drives up to the window to pay. She hands over some money, and I make a quick adjustment to her order. I type in Filet-Grill-No-Mustard. Now, my fellow employees in the back know damn well that a Filet does not come with mustard. Never has, never will. So when they see this order, they know a pretty girl is inching her Honda Civic closer to the pickup window where she will be trapped and waiting for less than 180 seconds, if everything is running right.

Most times, things are civil, but sometimes it turns into a brief shouting match to determine who is handing the bag out the window, especially if the person standing at the second window already happens to be a girl herself and doesn't really appreciate five greasy guys standing behind her when she hands the bag through.

So if you're ever in line at McDonald's and hear someone shout into the back, "I'm still waiting on that FILET NO MUSTARD," take it as a compliment. If at all possible.

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Everyone remembers something about McDonald's, though for a lot of people it has nothing to do with working there.

In high school English we read the poem "Short Order Cook" by Jim Daniels, a poem about a fry cook working on a big order. After we read it, the teacher asked, "Who here ever worked fast food?" I was the only one to raise my hand.

We talked a little about the poem the way you talk about poems in high school. What does it mean? But what does it really mean? What about that part or this part? I didn't know if there was anything to it. I did know that Jim Daniels must have worked as a fry cook, and he seemed to be doing okay now. Doing something else, anyway.

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Something you find out pretty fast is that just about everybody working at McDonald's is on the way out.

“Yeah, man. I'm starting at AIMS in the fall, so then I'll be out of here.”

“My uncle is going to get me on with his landscaping company.”

“KFC is offering eight-fifty, and I'm of a mind to take it if things don't shape up around here.”

There was one great quitting in my time.

The meat patties, after being cooked, are dumped into these plastic trays which slide home into warmers. When you go to make a burger, you pull the eye-height drawer out and spatula up a patty. At any given time there are probably somewhere around eighty patties in the warmers.

During the lunch rush, a guy threw down his spatula and started grabbing at trays. He pulled out tray after tray and dumped them on the floor, letting the meat and grease spill around our shoes.

And he quit.

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The customer is the enemy. Know this.

The customer can get you in trouble. The customer can rush everything and make you fuck up an order, extra ketchup instead of no ketchup.

The customer can help you too, but they don't. They never call back to say what a good job you did. How many times have you driven through to pick up food, and how many times have you called to say what a great job the greasy guy at the drive-up did stacking cheeseburgers in a bag?

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There was an old man who always came in alone. He was there my first day, and when he walked up to the desk and said, "Senior coffee" I thought he was telling me information I didn't need, I rang him up for a regular coffee. Before the register could ding open, he made sure to tell me all about the discount rate for senior coffee, 35-cents instead of 50.

The man would sit in the lobby for hours, reading the paper or talking to the other seniors who would come and go. Sometimes he would order a hash brown. He had a faded Marine Corps tattoo on his arm. I looked at that tattoo a lot. Was this what he

expected his life to be when he was wherever he was that he got that tattoo? Maybe this was happiness for him, and that was okay. And maybe coming in every day was the only thing he did. And maybe he hated that.

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Some duties were good. And some were not so good.

A good duty was pulling the expired Apple Pies. First, it means making Apple Pies, which is one of the easier jobs. Like nuggets, they're already cooked. You drop them in the fryer for a few, until they're unfrozen and a perfect chemical golden brown that says warmth so right it makes you want a nap there on the floor. Then, you have to box them and use the price gun to put a date on each one. It's kind of the same shit work you're always doing, but at least you don't have to hurry. Then, you pull the old Apple Pies from the display and put the fresh Apple Pies in. You walk away knowing you've done a good job.

Oh, and when you get to the dumpster, because you always take the Apple Pies straight to the dumpster rather than dumping them inside, you jam about three Apple Pies into your mouth as you toss the rest away, one at a time to make sure it takes a good while.

Most times a bad duty is something you earn mouthing off to somebody you shouldn't have mouthed off to. Tamac, the one who burned himself on the coffee, did a lot of mouthing off. He ended up with a lot of crap work.

One afternoon his job was cleaning out the inside of the PlayPlace. That meant climbing into plastic sun-cooked tubes, cramped neon ovens, and dousing every surface with bleach. Then, after a humiliating trip down the slide, climbing back in with a hose to rinse the whole thing out.

He spent the rest of the day with pink covering his skin, drinking cups on cups of water. He didn't puke like the last guy, so that was something.

Another good duty was making a stock list. Making a stock list meant printing out a little extra receipt paper and opening the cabinets around the registers to make sure we had enough of everything. Extra cups, extra lids, extra fry boxes, extra straws, extra sauces.

Making stock lists was a Phyllis job. Phyllis was one of the old people who worked at this particular McDonald's. There's a Phyllis at every McDonalds. She's been there no less than ten years and has no plans of retiring any time soon. Phyllis worked the same shift five days a week, and somewhere between one and three in the afternoon you damn well better stay away from Phyllis unless you're interested in filling a stock list. Because making a stock list is easy duty, but filling it teeters over into bad duty land. Filling it means hitting the stairs.

I read once that when building stairs, even an eighth-inch miscalculation, even putting one stair just an eighth-of-an-inch too high or low can cause someone to go flinging down the rest of the steps. Something about human rhythms makes us masters of the stairs, but the second we get into funhouse territory we just can't cope.

What we're learning here is that stairs can become treacherous with just a little something wrong.

Our staircase was narrow, dark, and covered by greased tile. The more you walk in the store, the more grease you track down with you. Because you might not know it, but you are always covered in grease when you work at McDonald's. No matter how you try to avoid it, you are soaked. Imagine being in a room bordered and lined with stovetops, and on each stovetop is cooking a pound of bacon. The grease weaves its way in with the air molecules and settles on everything. And anyone who has ever greased up a TV remote on pizza night knows it's impossible to clean grease from anything without using a hand grenade.

Once you conquer the stairs, filling the stock list is easy enough once you get downstairs. Walk past the breakroom. You'll see it there on the right. It's the room surrounded by chainlink fencing, lit up by a light bulb in a wire cage that protects the bulb in case a game of dodgeball breaks out. Nothing like a cement floor, chainlink wall, and naked lightbulb to make you feel relaxed and recharged.

Collecting the items is where the decisions come in. You, my friend, have a choice to make.

Choose Your Own McDonaldLand Adventure:

Do you...

A. Decide to trust Phyllis' math and get exactly what she says? (If so, turn to page 128 where you end up jamming 8 sleeves of medium cups in a cabinet before resigning yourself to taking another trip down the goddamn stairs to put stuff back. That is, unless you feel confident that you can shove the extras in one of the big lobby garbage cans without anyone noticing.)

Or, do you...

B. Decide that Phyllis doesn't have a great track record and almost always overshoots the restocking needs? (If so, turn to page 127 where you end up having enough room for one more set of Super Size lids, a fact that Phyllis asks you about over and over, telling you that it doesn't make sense to go all the way downstairs and not fill everything you need.)

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Everyone remembers something about McDonald's. A lot of times it'll be an urban legend. Someone's older brother found fingernail clipping sandwiched between the layer of a Big Mac. My uncle saw someone sweep a whole batch of spilled fries off the floor and straight into a fry Happy Meal.

Ours was pretty good.

A girl one grade above us went through the drive-thru. She got a chicken sandwich, and she bit into a cyst, a hard lump with clotted liquid inside that shot into her mouth.

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On one afternoon we got the call.

200 Big N' Tasty Extra Value Meals. Large Size. With Coke.

There was a banking convention downtown, and they decided to have spontaneous McDonald's catering for the afternoon.

We got to work.

200 Big N' Tasty Sandwiches meant 200 slabs of ¼ lb. meat, 200 tomato slices, 200 lettuce leaves, 200 shots of mayonnaise, 200 shots of ketchup, 200 sprinklings of chopped onion, and 200 sesame buns. Oh, and 400 pickles.

On hand at any one time, we don't have 200 anything. So we had people pulling up more B&T boxes, refilling ketchup, recharging mayonnaise guns, grilling meat, and jamming the whole thing into huge cardboard boxes.

As we were working, everyone in the back couldn't help but wonder what kind of low-rent convention was having 200 McDonald's meals. Especially when you consider that just making the order was going to take a solid 20 minutes, which meant the fries and burgers packed first would be long cold, the Cokes flat. And how they planned to transport 200 cokes was their problem. We had trays to hold four cups, and if you got risky you could jam a fifth in the center where the other four supported it. But that was an unsanctioned trick.

After a mad rush slapping patties on buns, filling cokes behind the counter and in the lobby, and shoveling ice, we did it. 200 B&T Extra Value Meals. We waited with pride. It sucked, but at least we did it. We had something to say when someone asked, How was work?

We waited for the bankers to show up. Maybe some of us would help carry the food out to the armored car they would use to transport this valuable cargo. Going

outside was always good, a miniature escape. Maybe they would give us a really nice tip. They were a bank. If nothing else, maybe a shitty plaque to hang in the breakroom.

And they never came.

The manager called back over and over. The number rang and rang and rang and rang. Either the number was fake or the people on the other side were laughing too hard to pick it up.

Mike, the manager who took the order, was sweating through his thinning hair. This is before we took credit cards at the register but after you could ask for a Mastercard number over the phone in special cases. He had to unload these meals.

It was officially over when the managers started offering Big N' Tasty Extra Value Meals, already made, to every customer who came to the register. At slight discount, of course. The offer was also made to employees, but our normal 40% discount did not apply.

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One morning I got a call at seven asking me to come in.

I said sure.

When I woke up all the way and realized what I'd done, I looked at my crumpled uniform on the floor. I started crying.

My mom called in for me, saying I was too sick to do it myself.

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There were two regular bums at my McDonald's. I couldn't tell you either of their names.

One was a real bastard.

He would ask for a paper bag and fill it with jellies. Then he'd shower in the sink, leaving black droplets for whoever got lobby duty that day. After that, he'd sun himself at the outside tables, chatting up employees. Especially the ones who smoked.

His favorite story was about Maria, one of the managers, and the time he fucked her in the ball pit part of the Playplace.

The other bum was a guy who would come in and order two Big N' Tastys. They were the most food you could get for the least money. When he got lucky, Diane would

be working grill. She wasn't much for breaking rules, but she doubled up the patties whenever he ordered.

After he got his food, he would take off.

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Abel was the only person who got fired while I was there. And that's not an easy thing to do. If you were calling for a reference, you would be told he was let go, caught eating in the back. And that's true. But the whole story is that he was the slowest man I have ever seen. And I don't mean he had some kind of handicap. I mean it was like he was slowed all the way down. Watching him wrap a burger was like watching someone do it under water, on mushrooms, blind, and stretching out the task like he was paying to do it and wanted to squeeze every dime. He would stare at the burger, his sleepy eyes taking the whole thing in like he was wondering if this was even worth the effort. Then he would curl up the left side of the wrapper. Then the right. Then fold. Then fold in the sides.

This is a company that was always mining for ways to speed everything up by a fraction of a fraction of units of time that didn't even exist yet because they were too small to be measured by the technology of the day. After working there a few months, I came in to find a manager delighted. The corporate HQ discovered that if the burger wrappers were reoriented in their drawers, we could flip them over as we pulled them out, saving one precious granule of time on EACH burger.

So, we changed out the drawers. Meanwhile, Abel stood with his jaw open, not saying a word, slowing up the works in a way that even the most extreme wrapper reorientation could not compensate for.

Maybe he was fired for eating a Chicken McNugget like they say. But maybe it wasn't eating the McNugget so much as it was the fact that it took him three and a half hours to swallow.

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The headsets in the drive-thru are tricky. They're tricky because they never really work right.

The way they are supposed to work is that a weight-triggered pad under the drive-thru turns on the headset. The headset beeps and you're on. You have two buttons. The large button is the talk button. Just like a walkie-talkie, when you hold it down the person can hear what you're saying. The smaller button is the mute button. When you hold it down you can say things to anyone else with a headset, and the person in the drive-thru can't hear you.

This was the number one venue for comedy at customer expense.

A man with a high voice would be ordering a 9-piece nugget and would have no idea that a teen was mocking him to the other workers in the store, toggling back and forth between him and the other workers. *"Oh my god, my voice is so high! Why is it so high? And do you want barbecue sauce with that? Listen to my goddamn voice. I am an elf. Okay, sir. Anything else? I'm full of helium."* The height of comedy was saying, "Anything else, sir?" to a voice that was clearly a woman.

The system wasn't perfect. There were headsets where the mute didn't work. There was one headset that was dropped too many times and the tone signaling someone pulling up was so loud that it rattled the pieces inside your ears. Sometimes a manager would have the other headset on, and that was the end of doing fake accents for the day. But sometimes it worked, and that was one hour down.

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Everyone remembers something about McDonald's. I had this friend, Eric, in fifth grade. If we could scrape together enough cash we would walk through the curving neighborhoods to get cheeseburgers.

Eric was a cool kid. He always found lighters on the ground and Playboys in the dumpster. He had a switchblade and a great scar from his switchblade. He could wheelie on his bike and whistle with his hands.

One of his best tricks was puking on command. He massaged the sides of his Adam's Apple, his eyes watered, and hot puke dove from his mouth and splashed on the ground. A great deal of time was spent discovering which different foods- Fruity Pebbles, Cheetos, whatever- made for the best puke.

After a cheeseburger run, Eric massaged his throat and a sludge of burgers splashed into the gutter. It was bright, electric orange.

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Leading up to quitting, you do everything a little worse. Nothing horrible. In all my time, I can honestly say I never saw anyone piss in anything or jerk off on a batch of fries. But you start cutting little corners. Instead of letting the McMuffins toast all the way, you slide your hand in to pull them out faster. Your hand is scorched a little, and the tiny seeds falling from the McMuffins feel like ground glass, but you get everything done faster.

You start taking food. This may come as a surprise, but just as it is in the rest of the world, there are no free meals behind the counter either. At least, no sanctioned ones. That's why most of the free meals are eaten in secret- by the dumpster, behind the walk-in freezer door, or, if you're like me, halfway between work and home, running a little and jamming an aged Big Mac in your face.

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Beanie Babies. Do you remember Beanie Babies? If you don't, here's a brief lesson:

Beanie Babies were dolls filled with beans, or bean bag material. They were small, the size of a gym sock maybe. There were bears, dogs, cats, and after they ran out of regular animals, octopi, crabs, and other sea creatures that, even if tamed, would be nightmarish to wake up next to. The thing that made Beanie Babies special was the fact that we were somehow tricked into thinking they were valuable. They were all created, probably in a Chinese warehouse, in limited quantities, and as collectors we bought into the bizarre idea that a limited amount of something means that it's valuable. Like diamonds. Or weird cheeses.

If you're not sure why they were popular, see: Pogs, Oilies Stickers, Trading Cards, Comic Books, Signed Baseballs, and Commemorative Cups of all stripes. If you're not sure how popular they were, just know that the creator of Beanie Babies has purchased the penthouse suites in the Chicago Spire, a \$40 million purchase in a building that may never exist because of construction issues.

And, for a very limited time, Beanie Babies migrated from their normal sales racks at Hallmark to their greasy, stripmall neighbors at McDonald's. They were smaller, they were in little plastic bags, and the marriage of white trash lunch with white trash collectibles was a corporate partnership not seen since KFC offered Precious Moments figurines in the bottoms of chicken buckets.

We sold the Beanie Babies over a couple weeks, but there was a one-day blitz wherein we sold four different varieties in one day. When one sold out, we moved onto the next. When we ran out of lobsters, we moved onto pandas. When we ran out of pandas, it was Dachshunds.

This meant that when I came in, the lobby was packed with mother/daughter teams, hungry for the next plush, and hungry to a lesser extent for McDonald's.

The limit was four per person, so there were a lot of middle aged women buying four, their daughters standing next in line with a crisp twenty in hand, held out in front like a ride ticket at the carnival.

Part of the deal was that in order to purchase Beanie Babies you had to buy something from McDonald's first. We ran out of ice cream cones, the cheapest item at sixty-nine cents, within the first hour. There was a steady stream of employees waiting to use the machine, cones in hand. By this time, eight months in, it was hard to pretend that I didn't know how to do things like refill the ice cream machine. All you had to do was open the machine's top, slice open the bag of liquid mix, and dump it in. The tricky part was not making a mess of the cream, and not using shake mix instead of ice cream mix. They looked the same, but the size of plastic bladder holding the mix was different, and a

fuck-up meant scooping gelatinous shake mix out of the ice cream machine with a big spoon.

After ice cream we ran out of apple pies. Then McDonaldLand cookies, which was a register button I wasn't even aware of. Then we ran out of small fry bags, and whenever someone bought a small fry the employee had to dump a small fry amount in a medium fry carton.

Hours went by, products ran out, and finally we sold out last Beanie Baby. Most of them sold, some pocketed by employees, tossed in the garbage, or thrown up into the ceiling tiles when nobody was looking just to end the stream of customers a little sooner. There were customers through the day who would approach the register, find out the Beanie Babies were sold out, and then leave without ordering, angry that we were all out and that we coaxed them into our store with the promise of crap merchandise. This was often when they went with the worst threat of all time: I'm never coming back here again.

When you are working at a fast food joint, you make the same goddamn money if you make no burgers or a thousand. The 200 Big N' Tasty day paid the same as the afternoon of the 4th of July, the only day I saw people let off work early because the traffic was so low. So when you threaten me that you will never come back, I will smile, say I'm sorry you felt that way, and imagine Ronald McDonald considering the loss of four bucks from his empire as he's setting his yacht on a course for Dubai while snorting a line of coke off a teenage hooker's creamy thigh.

After the rush, a group of employees was sitting outside when Maria, manager Maria, came out and approached me at the table. "Can I talk to you at the other table for a minute?" she said.

I stood, moved one table over, and sat down again. She mounted the bench side-saddle and tapped her long fingernails on the tabletop.

"Do you know how much your drawer made in one hour?" she said.

"No," I said.

"Fifteen-hundred dollars. Do you know how far off you were?"

"No," I said. But I thought it must have been a lot to warrant a rare outdoor visit from a manager.

"Forty cents," she said. "Congratulations. That is really amazing. The average margin of error for that much money is twenty dollars, and you were in a hurry." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a wooden coin. "Because you did such a good job, we want to give you a free meal. You can have it whenever you want. Do you want it

now?"

"No. Thanks," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"I think I'll save it," I said.

She said, "Well, okay. We just wanted to say thanks and good job."

She left the little wooden coin on the table. The maximum value of the coin was less than five dollars. I thought about the twenty bucks I could have in my pocket, twenty bucks that wouldn't even raise an eyebrow. I thought about Guillermo, the guy who went out in a blaze of glory when he pocketed two-hundred-fifty in one Friday night. He was fired, but they never go through the work of getting the money back. Two-hundred-fifty was more than a month of paychecks for me.

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Everybody remembers something about McDonald's. At a later job I did a lot of school visits. A lot of time went by where one class of kids would be waiting for a second class to arrive. One trick I came up with was to ask kids what their parents did. It gives them something to talk about.

One girl's hand shot up. Her mom worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken. Her dad worked at McDonald's. She said it in front of the whole class, right after the boy who said his mom was a teacher and right before a girl who said her dad made insurance. I didn't know what to ask as a follow-up. So I said, "Do you guys get to eat a lot of yummy chicken?"

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Shawna was the manager when I gave my two weeks notice. Shawna had a face that was scarred up one side. She was harsh, and the scar face made it easy to call her things. Lots of time was spent speculating what happened. Burned by the fryer? House fire where her husband died? The most believable story was one that involved her falling out of a car when she was a teenager. The road ripped away the skin on her face, and according to this theory, all down her body as well.

Sometimes, when I was on fries, I'd think about that face. The machine would beep and you would shake out the fries and dip them back in the oil. If you ever had soggy fries, someone didn't shake them halfway through cooking. The machine would beep and you would hang them to dry. The machine would beep and you would dump them in the tray under the heat lamps. When you dipped a new basket, little drips of oil would spatter your arms. Then you would feel the little circles of heat when you put your arms under the heat lamp.

On fries, it was easy to think about ways to get out of work, maybe forever. All you'd have to do is plunge your hand in the oil. Just say you slipped on an improperly cleaned floor. It would only take a second of being brave to jam your hand in there. After that, all you had to do was survive, and if some bitch who spilled coffee on her thigh got rich, so would a fifteen-year old with an arm crippled by hot oil.

But something about Shawna's face reminded you that maybe the lifetime of regular skin was worth a lot.

\$

Most of my McDonald's paychecks went to joining Columbia House Movie Club. When you sign up, you get eleven movies for a penny apiece. After that you have to buy four movies at inflated prices, but the math still works in your favor. I think.

My movies showed up all in one box. Eleven VHS tapes lined up side-by-side. In a final turn of bad luck, they showed up the same day we were leaving on a family trip to Yellowstone. A week without a TV.

My campaign to cancel the trip failed. As did the campaign to push the trip back two days, one day, and to continue the trip as normal while I stayed home alone with Snake Plissken, John Spartan, and others.

\$

Everyone remembers something about McDonald's. For me, it was saying Thank You all the time.

If someone said, "I need more fries down," you would say, "Thank You." If someone said, "This trash needs to go out," you would say, "Thank you," before you tied up the bag. It didn't even need to be a request. Someone would say something, a statement about a grill that was desperate for a scraping or a bathroom destroyed by a piss monster, and the only thing you could say was Thank You.

Give the lobby a sweep
Thank You.

Trays need wiping.
Thank You.

The grease traps are full.
Thank You.

It wasn't something we were taught, not in the training videos or paperwork. It was the only thing you could do when a lot of things needed doing again and again.

I need quarter meat.
Thank You.

Lobby machine needs ice.
Thank You.

It wasn't a sarcastic thing. Just call and response.

Motorcycle in the drive-thru.
Thank You.

People who work fast food will say they'll never eat it again, that they can't. Or that being around it so much made it something else, a commodity instead of food.

Ten-to-One.
Thank You.

Runner needs drink carriers.
Thank You.

I'm refilling ketchup.
Thank You.

For me, it was Thank You. Thank You didn't mean the same thing. The words tasted wrong coming out of my mouth.

Nuggets down.
Thank You.

You look nice today.
Thank You.

I need a sweep up front.
Thank You.

Nice work on those dishes.
Thank You.

You did a good job today.
Thank You.

I like your shoes.
Thank You.

Thank You for choosing McDonald's.

What can I get you today?

\$

My next job washing dishes had a lot less to learn. The best skills were carrying big stacks of plates, holding hot utensils straight out of the washer, and tolerating Mexican polka music for five-hour stretches.

They gave me a tour of the restaurant, the manager saying that if I stuck to the job I could move up to prep cook. He walked me towards the prep area, explaining that there might be a job opening up there soon. He leaned in to tell me a secret. The guy doing it now was okay, but he was so damn slow.

And there was Abel, slowest McDonald's cook on record, shredding lettuce, tearing the leaves apart like he was opening a Christmas present surrounded by his family, and feeling the love in their eyes all trained on him, never wanting to have the moment end.