

of a hotel. Mary Sue handed me a blanket and pointed to the barren floor between a mop bucket and a pile of used pillows. "You can bed there for tonight, but you'd best be gone by morning before the guests get up and see you lurking in the halls."

Lying on that floor, the smell of dust almost choking me, I longed for home. I could see our place as it looked from the road. Pine trees fenced in the house with overlapping boughs that reached up to support the clouds. We lived in a two-story plank house nestled deep in the woods north of Maustone, Wisconsin. Built with money from years of railroad work, the house with the pale pine board walls and the rippled, store-bought glass in the windows held the pride of two generations of the Lunden family.

We kept that house so clean, you'd have to go to the barn to find any dust. Footsteps sounded crisp and clean on the wooden floors. They weren't covered with any fancy polish, but I loved the low echo of my father's footsteps as he walked from the front door to the back and blew out the lanterns on each porch. I could hear it from my bed upstairs, warm under the quilts Grandma Margaret had made. Thomas was usually snoring from the other side of the

room. He could fall asleep as he undressed. Most nights, he fell asleep with one sock on, the other still clutched in his hand.

The next night I found myself washing dishes for a party of fifteen in a boardinghouse near the pier. It was plain to see that in order to have a place to stay for the night and a meal, I had to enter a hotel from the back door and ask if there was any work to be done. When the assigned duties were completed, there was usually a place to bed down tucked away from the view of the guests.

After sixteen years in the same bed, listening to Thomas with his dragging little snore, I felt so tiny and alone in a strange bed. After a few days, I wanted nothing more than to be in a familiar bed with sounds I knew chirping in the night. I longed for pine needles scraping the window in a small breeze or the creak of the back door as Grandpa Jacob sneaked out to the outhouse, but I couldn't run home like a lost child. I had to face Chicago and beat it. To do that, I had to find steady work and a permanent place to stay.

By luck or providence, I passed a restaurant looking for hired help one morning. It was called the Sunshine Cafe, but from the looks on

the faces inside, no one was serving any sunlight. Men crowded the tables, their shoulders stooped, their faces bent down to their plates. Most of them didn't even look at their neighbors as they shoveled food into their mouths. The black dust that covered them from their hair to their boots told me they probably worked in the coal refinery a few blocks off that filled the sky above it with ebony clouds.

I saw an old man coughing over his soup, a gray handkerchief to his mouth, and for a second he was my Grandpa Vince. My heart sank in my chest and I grieved for my grandpa and that old man, but only for an instant. The restaurant owner came bustling out of the kitchen with three plates clutched in each hand, shouting, "If you're here for the waitress job, get your backside into the kitchen."

I rushed into the kitchen before I had time to think. The cook was thinner than a dress on a sewing form, and she worked in silence as she pulled me into the pantry and trussed up my hair. The apron she gave me went past the hem of my dress. She pulled it out in front to hide the fact that my chest was near to as flat as her stomach. To finish her transformation, she rubbed my cheeks with paprika.

I laughed at the thought, and she shook her

finger in my face. "Hush child, this is what will make the difference between you making money and making babies for one of those hooting pigs you'll be waiting on. Keep your ankles out of their sight. Keep your personal goods to yourself, and let them think you haven't got the slightest idea about cooking." She stepped out of the pantry. "Besides, with the way you stink, I had to give you a little something to cut the edge. Don't want them running out of here without eating first."

I never learned the cook's name, and though I should have, I never got the chance to thank her. I dropped a plate of mashed potatoes covered with hot gravy into a man's lap because he told me I looked "fresh," then pinched me on the bottom. I lost all control of my hands. The owner sent me out the front door with a nickel to my name.

I soon discovered that the list of services a young woman could perform without training was quite short. I could be a maid if I knew how to clean properly, a cook if I could figure out how to keep from burning the food, a waitress, if I learned to control my reactions to pinching customers, a school teacher if I had a teaching certificate or even an inkling of how a schoolhouse was run, a nanny if I could find someone