

Hot Lunch

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The term “cafeteria worker” was new to Ramsey Elementary and had been implemented entirely in response to Sam’s arrival. A twenty-three-year-old male did not necessarily fit in with the seemingly tenured cafeteria staff, and therefore, the administration, in a reactive demonstration to combat stereotypical gender roles, replaced the term “lunch lady” with “cafeteria worker.” A rebranding only one person took issue with, due to the fact that “cafeteria worker” severely lacked the phonetic satisfaction of “lunch lady.”

Upon entering the cafeteria, and setting up the long tables with eighteen small red stools attached on each side, Sam was greeted to four enormous cardboard boxes pristinely stacked next to the kitchen entrance. He tilted his head back toward the ceiling—the styrofoam trays. These trays were yet another recent administrative change to reduce the “absurdly high” utility bill that came with washing the reusable plastic trays. This decision was warmly welcomed by Sam’s cafeteria cohorts and was as widely accepted as the revelation that using the power washer to hydraulically obliterate any remnants of crust clinging to the strategically-shaped indentations of the trays was the worst job in the kitchen. So now, once a week, an unknown delivery person dropped off four boxes, containing five sealed plastic bags, each of which encapsulates fifty styrofoam trays for a total of a thousand trays to use throughout the week. An absurdly generous amount considering the enrollment size of Ramsey Elementary was 612, down from 633 the year prior; not to mention the estimated 200-250 daily students who brought lunch from home. Sam carried the boxes into the kitchen, set two boxes near the front of the serving line, and put the other half in the storage room, where the rest of the inevitable surplus of trays would eventually go as well.

Sam had not expected to end up at Ramsey Elementary after finishing his undergraduate degree at the University of Idaho, but he was glad he did. After barely making it through his senior year, he thought it would be best to take a year off before grad school. He found an odd catharsis in the innocence of an elementary school lunch period. It was a brief time that seemed to suspend the realities of the unrelentingly exhausting real world—which Sam felt were becoming increasingly impossible to evade. He pulled boxes of mozzarella sticks from the walk-in freezer and brought them to Sue at the warming station, who broke them apart, and put the sticks on the stainless-steel warming trays to have ready for the 10:50 kindergarten lunch. The familiar duo worked in a mechanized flow of operation, silently preparing a school favorite.

“I got it from here, Sam,” Maggie interrupted, gently putting her hand on his shoulder. “Kindergarten classes are gonna be here in about five if you want to prep the checkout.”

“Sure thing, Mags,” Sam replied. The checkout was not really anything that needed “prepping,” but Sam obliged. He turned and smiled as he saw Ms. Malberson’s Kindergarteners start to line

up at the lunchroom doors, all wearing their hilariously-puffy down-jackets, ready for recess as soon as lunch was over. About halfway through winter, Ms. Malberson decided she simply could not assist another Five-year-old with putting boots on or zipping up jackets, all while another stream of students unapologetically pushed their way into the cafeteria. So, she insisted her students get ready for recess in the classroom and wear their coats to lunch.

Word quickly telephoned down the lunch line that there would be a class favorite for lunch. Sam’s favorite job was working the checkout, especially for the kindergarteners. It was a nightmare

at the beginning of the school year. The concept of not only remembering but typing their three-number pin-code was equivalent to a kindergarten dissertation. But Sam showed them how to match the numbers on the keypad, to the ones next to their names on the master list, and although the rest of the cafeteria workers were not thrilled with how it backed up the normally efficient line, it paid off. At this point in the year, kindergarten lunch was nothing short of a mealtime masterpiece. “Thanks, Sam!” they would chirp, successfully entering their pin. While their accomplishment diminished in value over time, Sam still offered a latex-protected high-five to students who raised their hands for one.

The line dwindled down to just four impressively patient kids. At the checkout was Corrin Hoff. A student who Sam had particular soft spot for, as she was the first kindergartener in Ms. Malberson’s class to memorize her pin number and be able to type it in all on her own, thus setting the bar of excellency for her peers. “Hi, Mr. Sam! Thanks for making mozzarella sticks for us today,” Corrin said over the top of her fully zipped winter coat. “You are very welcome Corrin! I hope you enjoy them,” Sam replied. Corrin’s mitten dangled from its attached sleeve as she carefully typed in her pin. “3...5...8... enter,” she quietly mouthed. Instead of being welcomed with the normal robotic “thank you” from the machine, a short buzz sounded. Sam looked at the monitor which read “Hoff, Corrin. INSUFFICIENT FUNDS. DO NOT SERVE.”

Corrin looked up at Sam. “I didn’t enter my number wrong did I?” she asked on the verge of tears, worried about tarnishing her reputation for numerical accuracy. Sam quickly clicked “OKAY” on the screen and said, “No! Sometimes this old computer just gets a little cranky!” Sam pulled one of the green slips from below the counter, a gentle reminder for kids to give to their parents to pay off their lunch debt. “Just give this to your mommy or daddy, okay?” He said as he folded the paper, preparing to put it on her tray. Sam looked down at the styrofoam tray and the meal on top of it. Four mozzarella sticks pressed against each other, a carton of milk that was oddly wet from the fridge, a small puddle of tomato sauce, and three already browned apple slices. Sam started thinking. He thought of the boxes of frozen ready-to-reheat meals in the walk-in freezer, he thought of the corporations who had monopolized those meals on the school, he thought of how unhealthy each tray he served was for those kids, he thought of the trays piling up in the trash bins after a single use, and he thought about how much he hated being an integral part of each of these problems. How long had he been lying to himself about his own importance? Why had he taken a year off? To help finance corporate monopolies exploit underfunded school districts? To put 6 year olds in debt? “Okay! I will! I promise!” Corrin said, interrupting his thoughts as she walked to her seat.

Over the next twenty years, Sam would end up giving out hundreds of those little green slips. And every time these thoughts would momentarily manifest themselves in his brain. Until slowly his daily, district-prescribed dose of 150mg Zoloft-Sertraline kicked in, and he thought of how cute the kids looked in their puffy jackets.