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Baker's Helper

50 The girl who doesn't eat comes each day at the same time. You'll be filling a tray of cannoli, and there she is, crouched by the case, her face pressed against the glass. You mix sugar and ricotta, wipe your hands on your apron, all the while watching her.

She is thin, almost fleshless, her olive skin drawn tight against bone. Even so, kneeling there she's Botticelli-beautiful, with dark curls and a full mouth. You don't move as her eyes take in the racks of tiramisu and macaroon—revealing what she likes by where her gaze lingers. Sometimes her breath leaves puffs on the glass and you think *angel* but there are fingerprints too, faint whorls you find later when you Windex the glass.

Finally you ask "Can I help you, miss?" the way you would anyone, you hope.

Her eyes rise slowly. Your heart moves, resettles in a different place. "Just looking," she always says, her voice soft, as if she's down the street at Bova's browsing silver. Then she stands, stepping back and running her tongue over dry lips.

You turn to another customer, conscious of Jimmy in the back. When you look again, the girl is gone, until tomorrow, when she will return as Jimmy is pulling biscotti from the oven and the bakery is filling with the nutty scent.

Daily the girl who doesn't eat is thinner but beautiful as you wait, watching, until one afternoon she struggles to rise from the case and you realize she is disappearing. You see ribs through her blouse, her clavicle, the bones of her jaw. That night you lie awake in the hot still air. When you do sleep, you dream of sparrows that gather on the stone steps of the park at lunch time.

In the bakery the next morning you fill a box with things she likes, one sweet after another. You begin to feel better. You hum, licking chocolate from your fingers. That's right. You will feed the girl who doesn't eat.

You are ready when she comes, catching her before she kneels. "Here, miss," you say, sliding the box across the counter. "This is for you."

The girl stares at the string-tied package.
“It has everything you love,” you tell her. “Lobster tails and babas, couple of half-moons. Take it, please.” You push the box closer. Her fingers touch one side, yours the other.

The pulse at her neck throbs. “No,” she says. “I can’t. I—” she pulls back her hand, looks at you as if she’s trapped. “This is a nice place,” she says, then she is gone, the door banging closed behind her.

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You hide the box behind the cakes, and when you leave you take it with you. It’s not good, stealing, but that night when you lie in bed letting one of the babas dissolve in your mouth, you realize all this really belongs to the girl who doesn’t eat, not to Jimmy, anyway. She has earned it.

The next afternoon, the girl is not there, which doesn’t surprise you. You hate yourself, waiting, but she never shows up.

On the third night you’re leaving Jimmy’s after work when from the street you spot her in Carducci’s. The girl stands apart from the espresso drinkers, running her fingers over a basket of pizzelle. She brings the wafers to her nose, and you inhale anisette with her. You are dizzy, there on the dirty sidewalk, not knowing whose longing you are feeling, yours or hers.

You lean against the brick and light a cigarette, considering what you’ll say when you go inside, practicing all the ways you won’t ask how you can help.