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A Slice

Aiden Ludka
Gettysburg College

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Author Bio

Contact Aiden

A Slice

AIDEN LUDKA

The sun is cascading into my bedroom when I wake up. It's the most beautiful reminder that I cannot afford curtains! Some mornings I sit up and pretend to bite the beams tickling the wall beside my bed. This makes a good replacement for breakfast, which most times consists of a long drive. I know sunbeams would taste gorgeous if they could be bitten. But they cannot. So I ready myself for work.

The dishes never have time to clean themselves, just like the fireplace never has time to sweep itself bare. So there is a festery dish smell in the kitchen, and trickles of black breath in the living room. Every Morning.

My Sweetheart says he doesn't mind. But I bought this house so we could live somewhere clean. I see by the crinkles around his eyes that he doesn't feel clean. I want everything to be a smooth block of ice that never dirties. For him.

Before we leave for work, Every Morning, I kiss my Sweetheart on his cheek, and I hold his chin between my knuckles like a tee ball I'm prepared to clobber with my big fat bat of affection. He kisses the back of my hand. It makes my brain *buzz*. Sometimes I say "buzz" out loud and make a face, and he laughs to himself, and I know it's not really because it was funny.

I drive away from our house and, Every Morning, I almost hit some neighbor pet with my car because I am watching my Sweetheart step airily into his own car through my rearview mirror. Like a frozen cube, he slides around in my mind until I arrive an hour later at the Apple Slicery.

The factory is called "Lambast & Forgo's Spiced Apple Slicery," and some people who respect the title but wish it was shorter call it "L - F - SAS," and some people who don't respect the title and hate it for being so long call it the Apple Slicery.

I stand by a conveyor belt that someone painted dry-tongue pink a long time ago, and when an apple comes rushing down the line, I jostle my App-o-chop-o-matic around it just in time to worry it into 17 even slices. By the time I can wonder whether my Sweetheart's Every Morning commute went well, the next apple has come racing towards me, and I wrap my

App-o-chop-omatic around that one, again and again and Again.

I do this for as long as it takes to fill my Carrier Quota, which is composed of 7 Jar Quotas, and each of these is maybe 40 apples, and if an apple races toward my head at 20 miles an hour and leaves a bruise, do I get to sit down for a minute? Manager says NO.

It's exhausting work, and now that I'm working overtime, the "exhausting" has started a transition into "grueling." But I need the overtime to pay for the house. Even with two paychecks, we're always needing things we can't get. The ceiling of my sunspot room has started to drip something yellower than sunbeams. And stickier than sunbeams. And it smells like yogurt. And the other day, my Sweetheart's toilet began to froth like witchcraft and activity, and it spilled all into the living room.

Fixing takes money. Money takes apples. And apples takes overtime. So I keep my conveyor belt busy.

Today, though, a tight knit of coworkers is gathered in the break room, stomping and chuffing like hungry horses. When I approach, I see that Benny Licke has a new attachment to his arm that everyone else is turning this way and thus way. It looks like an App-o-chop-o-matic: concentric metal bits, divided pie-like into a dozen and a half knives.

"Yup," Benny says ripely, catching a glint of light in his new appendage, "it helps me slice twice as fast. And the company paid for it themselves." He smirks smugly. "Those L - F - SAS bigwigs really know how to invest in their best assets."

"Did it hurt?" someone asks.

"Only when they chopped off the hand and sewed in the big metal part. But now I hardly feel it."

He smugs smirkishly. I can't get it out of my head.

Hardly notice it. Twice as fast. App-o-chop-o-matic. Curtains. Toilet. Ceiling.

...

I pull into the driveway with only one hand on the wheel. He's going to love it.

Most evenings, my Sweetheart has arrived home hours earlier and taken himself straight to a wet bedtime—thanks to the ceiling drip. But today, I catch him making dinner over our combustible stove. He spies me through the big kitchen window and comes rushing outside like a lamb.

"I'm making twice as much now!" I tell him as he leaps into my arms. "And I'm paying for all of it. The toilet fixing today, the ceiling drip

tomorrow, the—”

He yelps. Still so like a lamb.

Looking down at his pillowy sweater, I see a tangle of frayed stitching. Filthy. He looks at me. His eyes are repulsed. “What is it?”

I turn the metal this way and thus way on my arm. The sun has crawled out of the sky, and in this light, my new App-o-chop-o-matic looks like dull grayness. Its beaten metal looks tumescent on my skin. “I’m an investment,” I tell him. He sets his hands over his eyes.

I go to cup his chin, but dart away when I see my fixture no longer fits there.

With empty resignation, he lifts my arm to his face. He kisses me on the back of my new digit. Looking up, I see a red cross of blood blush from his lips.