

This is an excerpt.  
The full essay can be read  
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W E E K E N D

AFTER SEVENTH GRADE BASKETBALL PRACTICE, you ride the late bus, a trip that lasts half an hour before it reaches your stop that is still nearly two miles from your house, hitchhike distance, but less than half a mile from your parents' bakery. Because it's Friday, you're supposed to go there to help your mother close the shop.

It's 5:30 when you walk inside. Your mother is sweeping the floor behind the counters near the bread slicer. You drop your gym bag and your physical science book on one of the two chairs that sit on either side of the hardworking space heater. "Keep watch," your mother says. "Call if somebody comes in."

Hardly any customers show up this close to closing. The nearby mill that is rumored to be closing has a shift that ends at three. To ease rush hour traffic exiting nearby Pittsburgh, parking is forbidden between four and six. But the pans are always there to scrub, the emptied display ones as well as the heat-darkened ones used for baking. On Fridays, sales are higher and more pans are emptied. Tonight, baking begins four hours earlier than Monday through Thursday. Saturday is the busiest day of the week by far, the "make or break day" according to your mother.

Your mother scalds bakery pans in an ancient sink that sits in the back corner of the preparation room. She never wears the "housewife-tested" rubber gloves modeled on television. She never passes her hand under the open faucet to feel for temperature, trusting steam to mean there is heat enough to scrub the sugar left by sweet rolls and doughnuts, by coffee cakes and pies, flat pans sanitized and glistening on edge, reflecting the sunset's last light just before she switches to the deep pans for baking pecan rolls and upside-down cakes, fruit and nuts scattered over the greased bottoms so the cakes lift out gleaming with sweetness.

Two customers come in. One buys a loaf of day-old bread for half price. The other chooses the last seven cherry-filled sweet rolls, and your mother, because it is late, charges her the price for half a dozen.

Outside, it is midwinter dark by six. Your sister, who is fourteen, will have

dinner made, but your half hour in the bakery is only a preliminary. Since seventh grade began, Friday nights mean working beside your father for three hours and earning a dollar an hour. Shortly after seven, your mother drops you and your father off in front of the bakery and drives to her mother's house. She will peel apples there and slice them for your father to scatter on tomorrow's coffee cakes. It is only a mile. Her sister lives there too, and they can "catch up" for a few hours.

You grease pans and weigh dough to place in pans that shape bread. You measure ingredients. You punch the next batch of rising dough and leave it under a cloth cover to rise again. You stand for three hours in the unheated room that has no foundation beneath it. The low ceiling captures heat from the adjoining room's ovens so that your face roasts while your feet freeze until your mother returns shortly after ten to drop off the sliced apples and drive you home.

You stay up past midnight to watch *Chiller Theater*. Saturday is the one day to sleep in, and you are in love with monster movies. When you sit on the floor about six feet from the screen, your mother says, "Don't sit so close." You slide back a few inches and wait for her to walk down the hall to her room. You are three years from contact lenses. The new glasses that you wear for blackboard work are in your school locker. When you move close to turn down the volume because she never closes her door, you barely move back at all, sitting twice as close as before. Body snatchers, mummies, and werewolves are exciting, but what you like best are the vampires because they always seem to find women in negligees and sexy dresses to attack. You are twelve and obsessed with breasts. For now, you have settled for making a pledge to yourself to kiss a girl before the school year ends.

Your mother expects your door to stay open all night, but you never hear her leave in the morning at 5:45. Around nine, you hear your father come home. He will get up before three to take your older sister to the bakery to help out, but when you walk into the kitchen, he eats breakfast with you before he goes to sleep.

By ten o'clock, you are hitchhiking to Mt. Royal Boulevard where the friends you've made this year all seem to live in houses set on quiet streets a block or two from the boulevard. Since you started working on Fridays, your parents have allowed you to thumb rides as long as they are "local." You will never mention the woman who smoked and slurred her words when she picked you up. You will say nothing

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about the man who asked if you had a girlfriend, who, when you said “no,” asked, “Do you ever play with your friends, you know? Good-looking boys like you should enjoy themselves or let someone do it for them.”

You have to be home by five so you can ride back to the bakery with your father. Your mother is washing pans again; your sister is waiting on customers. Your

job is to tend a fire that burns a week’s worth of cardboard and paper in a depression behind the bakery. In January, even near the fire, you are never warm enough because you refuse to wear a hat or earmuffs, even when there is no chance some classmate will see you.

Your mother makes dinner and serves it at seven. Meat, potatoes, and a vegetable like always. Pizza is unheard of; sandwiches aren’t dinner. She washes the dishes by hand, scalding smears of grease before arranging the plates and silver in rubber slots for drying.

You shower and dress and watch a few minutes of Dick Clark’s weekly rock and roll show before she drives you to the high school for the junior high winter social. After half an hour of excuses and delays, you dance with a girl who some other girl says, “likes you.” Encouraged, you stay on the gym floor with her after the song is over. The second-hand information seems to be true. For the rest of the dance, you think that maybe this is the night that first kiss occurs.

You stay behind to talk with her in the school lobby, but two of her friends stand close by, one of them saying, “Come on, my brother’s outside, and he has his girlfriend with him, so you know he’s in a hurry to dump us.”

Though you are only ten minutes late coming outside, your mother is angry. “Where have you been? It’s late,” she says.

“I was talking to Nancy Jenkins,” you say, and she looks at the three girls who are coming down the stairs.

“They all look like they live out on the boulevard,” she says.

“They do,” you say.

“You be careful. Watch your manners.” She doesn’t ask which of the girls is