

## Notes on Snow Cones

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Tiny hands slam basketballs into tile floor. *Whump-whump-whump-whump*. It's a sound I hear in my sleep. The metallic beat reverberates against hallway walls, mingling with spectator voices and the *pop-pop-pop* of a popcorn machine. February snow falls outside — I know that, despite the windowless hallway. Sweat gathers in the armpits of my t-shirt and the knees of my jeans. Clusters of ponytails, flushed faces and ruby red uniforms rally around coaches with khakis and clipboards. It's 10 in the morning, the games will start soon.

This schoolgirls' basketball tournament is all players and coaches and referees and parents and grandparents and siblings. But I am none of these things.

"Medium." A round grandpa interrupts my people-watching.

"You would like a medium snow cone?" I correct him. He nods.

He gives me four dollars; I notice the \$50 bills in the folds of his wallet.

He ignores my tip jar, which reads "COLLEGE FUND!! THANK YOU!" in black sharpie.

The ice shaver's collar stings the tiny scratches on my fingers as I fill a blue paper cup with shaved ice. I skip my usual "here ya go, darlin'" when I pass it to him.

I pray to God for patience. The man floods the snow cone with strawberry syrup, making white ice turn blood red.

My dad's words roll around in my head. "Don't let customers get the best of you. Show them how to treat people."

He was fired from his last job, working in a car dealership's customer service, because he was "too snippy" with customers. Dad serves snow cones, too. It's not his day job; he does it for grocery money, or to get away from my mom. Maybe both.

A boy in Nike slides shuffles by. He sizes up my blue cart of ice, my six-flavor syrup dispenser, and me, my face caked with makeup (prettier people make more tips). He buys a medium snow cone for four dollars.

I check my watch; it's 10:03. That's eight dollars in revenue, in three minutes. In 57 more minutes, I'll earn the same.

My first day on the job, my boss showed me the ropes in his dingy warehouse, which is only 10 blocks from my house. I asked him how much each snow cone costs him.

"Oh, about 15 cents," he grinned in his manic way. "This here is a real cash cow."

Customers rotate through, a chorus of *gimmealarge* and *lemmegetasmall* and *doyouhavenapkins?*

I collect cash into a red zipper bag and scoop cubed ice into the machine, filling paper cups with crushed ice. I wipe down syrupy surfaces, mop up spills. It's mechanical, mindless.

There are irritated foot taps and icy stares while customers wait two minutes for me to use the toilet, maybe five minutes to gulp down a packed lunch.

At the end of the day, I count profits, making neat stacks of \$1s, \$5s \$10s and \$20s. \$1,024 in revenue. About \$938.50 in profits, taking into account my \$48 pay. It's a cash business, and I work alone. It would be easy to steal, but I don't.

I am freshly annoyed that I will take home \$48 and my boss will earn \$938.50. He did not smile at rude parents, appease sticky-handed children, drip with sweat in a too-hot hallway. His ears do not ring; his fingers do not bleed.

My dad would argue that my boss earned his profit fair and square, because he bought the cart and the cups and the ice and the syrup and the spoons and the napkins.

"But without me, the server, there are no snow cones!" I would fire back. "Why is simply owning stuff considered a productive enterprise?" I would try to confuse him with my college words.

Waiting for Mom to pick me up, I plop down on a concrete bench and pull my hood up around my face. I run my hands through my hair in an attempt to silence my ringing ears.