

## Cheryl, Managing

By Cathy Warner

At five twenty-five Saturday morning Cheryl jumps out of the maintenance man's pickup in the parking lot across the street from McDonald's. She walks through the empty lot and around the restaurant, opens the back door with her key and turns off the alarm. At five-thirty the maintenance man knocks and she lets him in.

"Come over after work," he says. "I'll cook you dinner."

"Maybe."

He said he loved her last night, but he was mid-climax, so she ignored it. Brad is twenty-six and didn't graduate from high school. His biceps bulge when he wrings a mop and she's at his apartment a lot, but keeps it secret in case her behavior won't seem ambitious enough to get her into Hamburger University. It's a big step from Second Assistant Manager and Cheryl won't let anything get in her way.

She turns on the soft rock station, unlocks the safe and sets up two cash drawers. She checks the stock of hotcake batter and English muffins and makes coffee. Brad turns on the vats and the grill, zips on a golden arches monogrammed jacket and hauls cases of Canadian bacon, sausage patties and orange juice from the walk-in freezer to the room-sized refrigerator. At five forty-five the breakfast crew arrives. They change into uniform and clock in. High school students. She assigns Clyde with the hand tremors and volcanic acne to the grill.

Cheryl gives Ellen the counter and Sarah the drive-thru. Their eyes are dull and puffy after the Homecoming dance the night before and their hair scrunches unbecomingly under M-embroidered baseball hats. Cheryl pats her VO-5ed bun and coifed bangs that reveal just enough forehead, a management advantage.

She readjusts her bowtie and slips her uniform shirt farther into her waistband. At six a.m. according to her Ronald McDonald wristwatch, and not one second earlier, Cheryl unlocks the lobby doors. "Good morning. Welcome to McDonald's," she says to the customers who file in.

She slips behind the stainless steel counter and runs production, calling orders to Clyde. "Six egg McMuffins, two hotcakes only, two hotcakes and sausage."

"Thank you," Clyde replies following procedure.

She drops a basket of hash browns in the vat and pushes the timer. There'll be extras, but that's what the warming bins are for—to insure that meals will be ready faster than at Burger King, which just opened next door. Customer traffic increases gradually then booms between eight and ten-thirty and she'll be prepared.

After the opening rush, Ellen and Sarah stand in the drive-thru window, which was added while Burger King was under construction, and talk about the dance.

"If you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean," Cheryl says.

The girls grab bleached white towels from the shelf below their registers and wipe two drops of coffee and one granule of salt off counters that were cleaned at closing the night before. They slip paper liners with oversized photos of Big Macs between plastic trays for the dining room orders.

The drive-thru buzzer rings. Sarah skips to the mike on the wall and depresses a button. "Welcome to McDonald's, may I take your order please?"

"Yeah, gimme an Egg McMuffin and hash browns and can I get a Coke this time of day?" The voice crackles through the restaurant.

"One moment please," Sarah says. She walks over to Cheryl who is making another pot of coffee. "Do we sell soft drinks before 10:30?"

Cheryl reaches over to the soda machine, pushes the Coke button and a stream of brown liquid pours into the drain.

"Oh, I guess we do," Sarah says.

Five minutes later, when Sarah's bagging hash browns, Cheryl hears her mutter to Ellen, "She is such a bitch." Cheryl follows Sarah to the drive-thru and watches her lean out the window, brown polyester pants straining across her too large rear.

Cheryl looks at her watch; Ronald's hands indicate 7:50. "Give me a Lot and Lobby and when you're done, work the grill with Clyde." Maybe she'll keep Sarah there through lunch, and after her shift watch her sniff her hands at the sink when the powdered soap doesn't obliterate the smell of reconstituted onion.

Cheryl is above Lot and Lobby these days, has been since her promotion six months ago. All the counter people start out emptying trash, wiping tables, sweeping discarded French fries and smashed cigarette butts off the patio into a long-handled dust pan and mopping the lobby and bathroom floors. She used to request it when things slowed down after the dinner rush. Making the lobby sparkle can be gratifying.

In her brief management career, Cheryl has learned that Lot and Lobby is the most effective way to discourage un-McDonald's-like behavior. She sends out those who talk too much, say the wrong thing—particularly if it pertains to her—or clean too little. Quality, Service, Cleanliness, and Value are the commandments that she, as Second Assistant Manager, strives to uphold.

She waits for Sarah to slam the metal pass-through, then glares at her before taking drive-thru orders and running production. The problem with Sarah and Ellen and kids like them is that they're undisciplined. They work here because their friends work here and say it's easy money. They plan never to work anywhere with a timecard again.

They have no concept of life after next week's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* marathon. They have no idea what it's like to be eighteen and pregnant with a boyfriend who promises to marry you after graduation, but hands you a check for \$500 and says, "Take care of the problem," instead.

Once Cheryl's promoted to First Assistant Manager, she'll train Clyde to work counter. He's always early and never asks for nights off to attend football games or proms that lead to sex in backseats. He's neat and clean—except for the acne, but she can smell the Clearasil. He's trying. He smiles reluctantly, but Cheryl understands. She flashes her mouth of silver only when customer etiquette requires. Twenty-three isn't obscenely old for braces, although her sister says it's another example of her skewed priorities.

It's eight-thirty and Cheryl needs a cigarette. "Watch production," she tells Ellen who is bagging an order.

"Thank you," Ellen says and lifts her chin.

Cheryl unlocks the manager's desk and taps a Marlboro from the pack in her purse. Outside, she leans against the restaurant wall, the stucco scratching her back, and drags on the cigarette. The low autumn sun shines in her face. She stretches a hand like a visor and surveys Brad across the parking lot bundling cardboard and operating the trash compactor. He's fluid like a cat. He's done this job for years, could do it with his eyes closed. That's the way he touches her, as if he'd memorized a map of her nervous system before she ended up at his apartment, drunk after a party.

He grins at her as if he knows she's been staring. She drops her hand, takes a final drag and grinds the cigarette with the toe of her brown Naturalizer's. They're expensive, but with her narrow feet, worth it.

She won't go to his apartment after work. He's started talking after they have sex, instead of turning on TV sports. He's been spilling his life story—moving every year with a string of loser-step-dads—and wants to hear hers. No one in town knows she has a kid. Her sister, Margaret, is raising Alex. She sued for custody when Alex was a year old, and won. Cheryl can visit, supervised, once a month, but she doesn't. She phoned about a year ago. Alex didn't remember her.

She records hourly readings from the registers and thinks about the store Mr. Reynolds plans to build across from the new mall. She pictures herself at Store Number 4, fresh from Hamburger University. Restaurant Manager, in charge of everything:

purchasing, scheduling, advertising, and hiring. She'll have a health plan and paid holidays. She'll save for a condo, maybe get a cat.

Alex will visit. She'll take him to work, give him a tour of the grill and the freezer. They'll sit on the patio, eating cheeseburgers and Shamrock shakes on Saint Patrick's Day. He'll climb in the play pit and they'll play catch with the balls. She'll drive him to Fresno singing along with the radio and he'll tell her riddles. She'll pull into Margaret's driveway, and Alex will hug her so tight she can't breathe and say, "I love you so much, Auntie Cheryl. I wish you were my mommy." She'll have a reasonable discussion with Margaret, who'll agree it's for the best, and pack Alex's suitcase while he drops his stuffed animals into a pillowcase.

Cheryl is up front for the 10:30 switch from breakfast to lunch. There are always customers, trying to order cheeseburgers at 10:27 or hash browns at 10:32, who need the rules explained. She's menacing with her tight black bun and colorless pinched lips. They don't argue long.

At eleven she is inventorying lettuce and cheese in the walk-in when Brad pops in. He rubs the goose bumps on her arms.

"I'll barbecue steak tonight." He kisses her, tongue swiping against her braces. Then he's gone, off to his office cleaning job.

She loses count and starts over.

After the lunch rush, Jim Jameson stops by. He's doughy, blond and runs the store. Promoting Cheryl was his first official management decision. He orders a small coffee and asks to talk to Cheryl.

"Take production," she says to Ellen. She pours another orange, follows Jim across the dining room and slides onto a molded plastic seat.

"You're up for review next week," he says.

Cheryl nods.

"If it were totally my call, I'd promote you to First Assistant." He sips his coffee and wraps his pudgy fingers around the cup. "But the managers need to function like a team and I've heard complaints."

She sits rod straight. "Tell me the problem and I'll fix it."

"Technically, you're doing everything we ask of you."

"I always give one hundred percent, you know that."

"It's your lack of people skills. The crew doesn't like you and the managers say you're inflexible."

"My shifts are models of productivity and cleanliness. Everything is done and done right," she says. It's not her fault other managers chat when they should be working.

Jim swirls his coffee and takes one last swallow. "But the kids aren't happy. If they're not happy, they quit and work next door. Then their friends don't come here after school. I'm not in business to train Burger King's crew or hand them customers."

"Neither am I. I'm committed to this restaurant." Cheryl feels her molars clamp down.

"Let's give it another six months, and see how you're doing then. Sound fair?" He stands up.

"More than," Cheryl answers. It's not fair, but life never is.

They shake hands. She dumps her full cup in the trash and walks behind the counter.

Why can't she get ahead? Life smiles on the Homecoming Princesses like Sarah and Ellen, and her sister, Margaret, a master of sucking up and crying on cue. Everyone else gets screwed.

Margaret had sat in court blotting her cheeks with a wadded Kleenex and sniffing, "I'm only thinking of what's best for Alex."

It wasn't *that* hot the day Cheryl left him in the parking lot. She could see her Datsun from the window of the beauty parlor. She had to get her haircut. It was falling

out in handfuls and clogging the shower drain. Plus Alex would grab clumps and rip them out with his Krypton-baby-strength. The judge didn't understand that she'd cut her hair for Alex. Once it was short, she'd quit yelling and spanking. "I'm doing the best I can," Cheryl had said in her defense.

*Your best isn't good enough* was the judgment then and Jim's verdict now.

Cheryl quit drinking the day of her promotion, but now she'd kill for a beer. She imagines the snap and sigh of opening a cold can; the easy way aluminum gave in her grip. The tangy liquid as it swam down her throat, foam lingering across her mouth. Alcohol crawling to her brain and then the floating sensation.

At two Cheryl conducts an unscheduled search of the employee lockers. It always cheers her, and keeps the crew on guard. At two fifteen she retrieves her purse, walks under the golden arches and lights a cigarette. She passes the new Burger King, the Shell Station and Seven-Eleven, its windows plastered with beer ads. She misses the alcohol buzz and the way her arms and legs became lead-heavy and solid when she wrapped them around Brad, as if she wasn't alone in her body, as if a guiding force would make life turn out right. Cheryl couldn't stop at the buzz; so she quit. She doesn't miss the headaches, hours gone AWOL and feeling as if she'd been dragged across a desert while she slept.

She should pick up a couple Hungry-Man dinners at Alpha Beta, but the bus is due any minute, so she waits at the stop in front of the market for the Number 17 to take her three miles to County Hospital. From there she'll walk two blocks to the converted garage she rents from Mrs. Clooney.

At home, Cheryl will hear the drone of Mrs. Clooney's Singer through the wall as she sews dresses for weddings and First Communions. When she walks into the kitchen, Mrs. Clooney will be sitting on the floor, cheeks flushed and pins in her mouth, singing "Here Comes the Bride" like a ventriloquist, surrounded by yards of lace and taffeta in shades of stale Easter candy. Cheryl will lose her appetite and settle for an Orange Crush and a pack of Marlboros in her room.

The industrial carpet atop the cement floor is murder after her shift, so she'll sit on her bed and read one of the business management books from the library. She'll glance at the clock every ten minutes or so, wondering if Brad is home from work, if he might drive her out to the reservoir to catch a few trout and make out on the bridge where he likes to watch the sunset.

Alex's kindergarten picture will stare at her from its ABC frame. His front teeth are missing, the ones that made him scream a few days before Margaret took him. Margaret sent the picture and soon, tomorrow, Cheryl will stick it in the drawer of her nightstand. Alex has Margaret's eyes.

Cheryl waits for her bus. Brad will be home soon. His apartment is a half-mile away on Sycamore. Maybe she'll walk over and stretch out by the pool. Take off her tie, unbutton her collar, roll up her sleeves, and point her lounge in the direction of his second floor apartment and wait. He'll stop at the door, balance a grocery bag on his hip and dig into his pocket for the key. There'll be steak—a cheap cut, but Brad's great with Adolph's Meat Tenderizer—two Russet potatoes, a bag of frozen green beans, and a six pack of Meister Brau—it used to be two when she drank. Brad will feel her watching, the way he always does, and will lean on the railing and say, "Hey, Foxy, what's shakin'?" She'll walk upstairs. The kitchen will smell like him. Grease, Brut and Pinesol.

He'll crack a beer, take a swallow, and press against her. "If you're gonna taste like an ashtray, I'm gonna taste like a kegger," he'll say.

Brad's a master at the comfortable slide into drunk, and she gets high watching his slow smile when he sees her naked. After his fourth beer, when his concentration seems to last forever, the sex is great. Lately though, he drinks the whole six pack and gets sloppy, revealing his childhood scars and talking about love.

A bus cruises toward the stop and Cheryl slings her purse over her shoulder. It's the 35 with a Burger King billboard on its side: *Have It Your Way*. The 17 is late and she's tired of waiting.

She'll walk home; it's a perfect fall afternoon. She'll stroll through old town watching men chug Bud's while they clunk around under car hoods. Kids will run and jump into crunchy leaf piles, dogs barking behind them. Mrs. Clooney might invite Old Man Kelly over after his volunteer shift at the hospital. He'll bring Chinese and Parcheesi, and knock on Cheryl's door, inviting her to join them.

Or, she'll walk to Brad's. Maybe tonight, just this once, she'll have a beer, two tops. After dinner and a swim, they'll watch TV, have sex, then watch more TV. *The Love Boat* and *Saturday Night Live*. Brad won't talk about love or the way life shafted him before he moved out at fifteen. He won't want to know more about Cheryl than what he can see and touch. Everything will be fine, like it was two weeks ago.

Unless he asks her about work, he's conscientious about, "How was your day?" If she's had two beers and he's snuggled against her back after sex, her mind will be loose. She might say something like, "I'm not getting promoted." He'll say, "It's not the end of the world," and "Hang in there." Then she might say she had a plan and mention Alex. The words will wrap around them, like Nastassja Kinski's python in the poster above his bed. She wonders how that will feel once the buzz fades and she's herself again. Can you erase confessions?

What will Brad remember when he's sober, sitting at the dinette in his boxers, eating Special K with sliced bananas? That he held her and that her black hair draped across his stomach while she cried into his rib cage and it endeared her to him? Or that her face screws up like a bat's when she cries and that she's an unfit mother who hasn't seen her kid in four years?

The 17 bus arrives and the automatic doors fold open. Two passengers get off, teenage boys who work at McDonald's. Cheryl glances at her watch; Ronald's yellow gloves point five to the hour. "You're going to be late," she says.

"It's our day off." They step around her.

"Man, she's got something up her butt," one says to the other when he thinks she can't hear.

"Hey Cheryl," the bus driver calls from his seat. She's a regular on his Saturday route. He knows her schedule and never skips her stop even when she's composing a mental letter to Alex and forgets to pull the bell cord. "You gettin' on?"

"No," she says, "Not today."