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Age: 17, Grade: 12

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Category: Short Story

The Cycle

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"I'm here, I'm here!" the boy said, rushing through the front door and trying to push through the customers, solid as stone, not willing to move an inch for him. "I'm right here!" he continued, short of breath as he made his way behind the counter to the back of the restaurant. Almost collapsing from exhaustion he made his way to the man in the blue shirt, loudly breathing as the manager stood there, quiet as a mouse, bagging orders.

Not even sparing the boy a glance he said, "You're two hours late." The bitterness of his voice cut the boy like a knife. His coldness would have been enough to store all the frozen product in the restaurant by itself.

The boy tried to respond, "I'm sorry, I tried to call but my pho--"

"It will be counted as a no call no show," the manager interrupted.

"But I'm here, I showed, I am showing right now," the boy said, awkwardly, careful not to upset the manager.

"You were late, we had to call someone to fill in."

"I was only late because class ran late and I missed the bu--"

"It is your responsibility to show up, *on time*." The manager interrupted him again, raising his voice ever so slightly to the boy.

The boy, almost accepting defeat, lowered his head toward the ground. "Okay, well, I'm gonna go clock in then."

"No need, you can go home, we don't need you right now," he told the boy, his voice lowering but his tone still chillingly cold and apathetic.

"I still have six more hours left," the boy argued. "I'm already dressed, I walked all the way over here from school, I don't even have a ride home until--"

"We called in someone to replace you, you can go home," the manager interrupted for a third time, raising his voice at the boy again, not taking his eye off the order. His face darkened in anger, enough to make his cold bitter tone melt and burn the boy with his aggravation.

"Okay." the boy gave up. With a deep sigh he took off his hat and walked past the customers, fewer now, unmoving uncaring still. He ambled his way through them, sitting down at one of the empty booths. Taking out his phone, he begrudgingly tapped on the contact labeled 'mother' and the phone began to ring.

As it rang, once, then twice, the boy started to remember what happened last time he was sent home early from work. After his boss had sent him home early because they were overstaffed, he had staggered through the front

door to be met by his mother, who was sitting in the living room.

“Why are you home early?” she asked suspiciously before he even put his bag down.

“They sent me home early,” the boy responded.

“Did they ask you or make you?” his mother said angrily.

“No one else wanted to leave, so they told me to.”

His mother looked at the boy slowly, turned her head, and flashed a sarcastic smile.

“So you chose to leave early?”

The boy tried to defend himself. “No, mom I didn’t really have an choi--”

The mother interrupted, “You can't be leaving early. You're supposed to be saving up for college.”

The boy, stressed now, continued to defend himself. “I’m trying to.”

“Clearly not, since you're here right now,” she said angrily.

The boy feebly tried to defend himself. “I didn't have a choi--”

The mother interrupted him. “Not only that, but your Spanish teacher called me and said you're failing her class. How are you failing Spanish, boy? You're supposed to be Mexican.”

Something about the boy’s fully white mother saying that made him feel uncomfortable, but he tried to block it out. “I just haven't had time to do all my work, on top of my job.”

His mother, quick to tear down what she perceived as an argument, told the boy, “Don't blame work for your grades boy. When I was your age, I had three jobs and went to college, so you don't have any excuses.”

The boy didn't have a defense. He told his mother, “Well, it's not easy. I've been really stressed recently.”

The mother, again quick to respond, said, “Don't talk to me about stress, you’re too young to be stressed. Now go upstairs and do that homework you're missing, and you better not be coming home early tomorrow.”

The boy tried to speak for himself. “I was actually gonna try to get some sleep. I'm really tired and I have school tomorr--”

His mother interrupted her son, “Finish your work boy.”

After the third ring, she finally picked up. The boy spoke quietly. “Hey... yeah I know you're not back yet but... yeah I missed the bus and I was la--. No it was just because class went la--. Uh huh... okay... I'm sorry--. There's no way you can pick me up?... Okay... I’m sorry... I'll see you tonight... Bye.”

After they hung up, the boy rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and rested the temple of his head on his hand as more and more customers filed in. He couldn’t help but feel like he had no control. If his teacher hadn’t kept him after class, he would have been on time and none of this would be happening. It had only been a couple hours ago when the teacher called his name as the class came to an end. “Mr. Rodriguez.” The boy had looked toward the front of the room to the teacher in front of him calling his name, sitting at her desk, arms crossed.

“Can I speak with you after class?” she continued.

All the students filed out of the classroom, talking among each other as the boy slowly got his bearings from deep sleep and walked toward the teacher's desk.

"You can't be sleeping in my class, Mr. Rodriguez," she said to the boy in a monotone voice.

The boy tried to defend himself. "I know, I'm sorry. I already talked to the counselor, and I've been really stressed lately, and--"

"You're too young to be stressed," the teacher told the boy, cutting him off. "I know what your counselor said, but I don't think you're stressed. I think maybe this is just laziness."

The passive aggressiveness of the teacher aggravated the boy, but he bit his tongue and resigned himself to the teacher's judgement.

"You're failing my class, and you have several missing assignments. When you get home today, you'd better complete all of these assignments if you intend on passing."

The boy tried to respond carefully, not to sound disrespectful to the teacher. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Pérez, I actually have work tod--"

"I don't wanna hear any excuses. You have to have your work turned in by five tonight," she interrupted. "Now let's look at your grades here," she continued, clicking her mouse and staring at her desktop.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Pérez, I actually have to leave soon to catch the bus," he told his teacher nervously.

"If you were focusing on your Spanish as much as you were focused on getting home, then you would be passing this class." She looked at the boy condescendingly before turning back to her computer. "Oh, it says here that you're also failing English," the teacher said, ignoring him.

The boy sat there biting his tongue at every snide remark as he looked at the worn wood floor.

"Hey" the manager yelled, startling the boy, reminding him where he was.

"Yeah?" the boy said, the unmistakable sound of excitement and hope in his voice.

"If you aren't gonna order anything, you can't sit there," the manager told him, cold again in his tone.

"Oh . . . I'm sorry, I'll leave."

The boy slung his bag over his shoulder and slowly made his way through the customers, feelings of embarrassment and insecurity fresh in his gut. As he exited the building, he felt the sprinkles of the first cold snow falling on his shoulder. He brushed it off and made his way down the street to the bus stop at the corner. He shivered as he arrived at the bench wearing nothing but his uniform to keep him warm. There was only one other man waiting, leaning against the pole on his phone wearing a long scarf and a thick wool beanie. The boy rubbed his hands together to keep them warm as he built up the courage to talk to the man.

"Hey, uh . . . do ya know when the bus comes?" the boy said quietly, stumbling through his words.

"Yeah, in about fifty minutes," the man told the boy before looking back down at his phone screen again.

"Oh, thanks," the boy replied back quietly. The man looked up from his phone toward the road with a disappointed look.

He turned to the boy and said, "Yeah, these damn busses are always late. I used to be a bus driver ya know. I was never late, got to every stop on the dot, then they laid off a bunch of us. There's just not enough drivers to keep up with the routes anymore. It gets worse every year, it's just a part of their cycle."

"I'm sorry man," the boy responded awkwardly not knowing what else to say.

After a couple seconds the man looked up from his phone and said, "Screw this. I'm walking."

As the man walked away from the bus stop, the boy's eyes felt heavy. He sat at the bus stop and leaned his head on his bag, rubbing his hands together for warmth as the light snow began to slowly sprinkle onto his head. His eyes slowly closed as the snow came down on his shoulders, knowing that when he woke up and returned home, the cycle would just repeat itself. *What's the point in fighting* he thought, as he drifted off--giving up and letting go of what little energy he had left.