

Behind

It had been almost two years since my life had taken a dramatic turn, and if we're being honest here, I was expecting to be back on my feet by now. Here I stood, at the ripe age of twenty-three, in the center of a dimly lit restaurant kitchen, surrounded by a sea of white tile floors and spotless stainless steel countertops, chopping onions at eleven o'clock on a Friday night. I had been doing this for a while, though it was never easy to be reminded every week that while I cut vegetables and listened to coworkers bustling around with pots and pans yelling "Corner!" and "Behind!" every few minutes, everyone else I knew would be indulging in fun nights out on the town. I couldn't help but sit in my jealousy. Not exactly my idea of a picture perfect Friday night in my twenties, but what can you do? The restaurant business has never been glamorous.

I was in college when the pandemic hit. I was twenty then, and felt like I was on top of the world up until that point. I was going to my dream school on some decent scholarships, had a solid group of friends, and had finally moved into a small, overpriced apartment by the water's edge with the boy I had been dating since high school. Things were alright, and it felt like I had finally settled into the loud, boisterous, bustling city of Chicago and found my place in the world. Queue the pandemic.

Things weren't too terrible at first. Classes transitioned online - something I was somewhat grateful for, since this meant I could open my schedule up more at work. I had been working as a chef at a small restaurant in Chicago and had quickly worked my way up the chain, despite my age. While cuisine wasn't exactly what I was passionate about, I learned to love the tedious work, monotonous menus, long hours, and the connections I made with coworkers and regulars along the way. The restaurant I worked for was able to stay open despite the lockdowns,

marked as an essential service, though we stuck to only offering to-go food. The gravity of the current world state started to weigh on me, but in the beginning, I was able to manage.

It was about a year after the start of the pandemic that my entire world began to split. It started when my friend group absolutely crumbled, with two of my friends divulging in an absolutely diabolical game of fighting and doing horrendous things to each other - one even going so far as to spread a rumor about the other being pregnant with another friend's boyfriend's child. Needless to say, things turned messy within a split second, and I found myself completely isolated and stuck in the middle of a problem I didn't start and didn't care to be in. So, let's start the list of terrible things that have happened to me recently with losing my entire group of long-term friends. Fun, right? Through it all, I began working more and buckling down on school and job applications. I was twenty-one at this point and would be wrapping up college soon with my degree in sports management and nutrition - if I could just push through and get a good job in my field after graduation, everything would be fine. It was simply a matter of remaining focused.

It wasn't too long after losing my friends that my relationship fell apart too. We had coexisted peacefully in the same apartment for well over a year, but things began taking a turn with him too. He suddenly started locking his phone, going on long weekend trips with his "buddies", and shutting me out. It wasn't long before I started to realize what was going on - or more like *who* was going on - and things *really* went south. He moved out of our apartment shortly after, and I was left with the empty apartment as a living memory of everything we had once had. Five years down the drain all over some girl named Veronica. But hey, at least I got to keep the cat.

If you thought things were already pretty bad, prepare yourself for the real kicker. A couple months after my ex boyfriend kindly removed himself from both our relationship, our

apartment, and my existence, the restaurant I poured my heart and soul into over my duration working there throughout my entirety of college began to go under. Sales were dramatically dropping despite desperate grabs for new business. People were quitting left and right, down to the point where we had a single server left because there simply wasn't money to be made anymore, and the owners could barely afford to pay her hourly. The business eventually completely failed, unable to bounce back from the damage inflicted by the pandemic. I lost my job, and it was at this point that I truly gave up. For the remaining few months of my college education, I took out a large sum of student loans, accepting the debt it would leave me in shortly, and skated by in school with grades just good enough to get me to graduation. The day after graduation, I packed up the tiny Chicago apartment I used to love so much, throwing out most items until I was left with less than ten boxes. Me, my fluffball of a gray cat, and our ten little boxes had no plan, no money, and no job, so I was left with only one option: moving back in with my parents, into their tiny home in coastal Florida. That just about catches you up.

So here I stood, at the ripe age of twenty-three, in the center of a dimly lit restaurant kitchen, surrounded by a sea of white tile floors and spotless stainless steel countertops, chopping onions at eleven o'clock on a Friday night. I had let my grief fully engulf my life at this point, if you couldn't tell. I let myself sink into a chef position at a semi-upscale restaurant on the beach and let the monotony of the day to day engulf me. *Chop, chop, chop*. My life was in disarray, and yet here I was, ensuring each and every slice of onion I portioned out was perfectly uniform - how absolutely ironic. I couldn't help but start to feel entirely overwhelmed as I began thinking about the last few years, all the poor decisions I had made, and all the things that had gone wrong for me. Is it too dramatic to think I'd been cursed or something? An overwhelming feeling of dread started to take over my body as I thought about how behind I am in comparison to

everyone else my age. Here I was, working a job I hated, living with my parents in my childhood home once again, absolutely lost with no direction. I had graduated over a year ago and still couldn't get a job - or even a *shot* at an *interview* - despite sending in what felt like thousands of applications every month. I could feel my hands start to shake and eyes well with tears with every thought, and it wasn't long before I started chopping vigorously without much thought of consequence, and accidentally sliced my hand. The bloodied cutting board brought me back to reality, and I rushed to throw a kitchen towel onto the cut and run to the first aid kit yelling obscenities. "I need to go home," I said quietly to my manager after she finished patching me up. With a sympathetic nod and a quiet yes, I rushed out the door and fumbled with the keys to my car before driving the dark, dimly lit streets back home. After a quick shower, I retired to bed and found myself feeling like I was being eaten alive by sadness. How had I ended up here? Where was I going? Would I always be stuck in the restaurant industry? Why was I a magnet for bad things? Would I live with my parents forever and die in the same house I grew up in? I let the pounding head I had as a result of bawling lull me to sleep.

Ring, ring, ring.

In a panic, I grabbed at my phone sitting face down on my bedside table, convinced I had missed my alarm and slept through the beginning of my shift. As much as I loathed my job, I couldn't afford to lose it. I turned the phone to face me, the screen nearly impossible to read as the sun scorched my room through the windows. It took me a few seconds to realize my alarm wasn't going off, but that I was getting a call from a number I wasn't familiar with. Concerned, I pressed the green button "Hello?" I said, careful to try to cover up the fact I had just woken up and still had a groggy voice.

“Good morning Kaitlyn, my name is Dr. Howard. I’m the head nutritionist for the NCAA. I was just looking through your application and am quite impressed. Any chance you would be able to join me on a Zoom call later this afternoon?” a man’s voice said, sending a jolt into my body as I sat up in bed and quickly muted my microphone, letting out a high pitch scream before agreeing to the call.

Maybe I wasn’t so behind after all.