

We've Done our Best

By Claire Maley

3rd Place in the Over 26 Age category

She hasn't moved for twenty minutes. My boss nudges me and points to her. "Clear around her — that'll get her moving," she whispers, then beams at the suited man. "Cream on your hot chocolate?"

Before the still customer sits half a flat white. The frothed milk has thickened, like cups I clear away. The swirled heart on top remains untouched. Her fingers are laced around the cup, lingering on its fading warmth.

"Another?" I ask.

She doesn't respond. Drops of condensation run down the windowpane, revealing an opal-white sky. She stares, but doesn't see.

My boss stares, and my mind empties halfway through counting out change. Turning away, I clear the next table.

That's when I'm hit with a memory of my infant school teacher. From outside the staffroom, I once heard her say, "That Shelley Jones — when she's grown and I'm old, she'll look after my feet."

The other teachers laughed. Not unkindly. As though they knew something about me that I didn't.

I never understood what she meant. I used to sit beside her sensible shoes when she read to us on the carpet, but only because I liked the pictures. I wanted to be close enough to notice every detail.

My boss's stare drags me back to wiping tables. I glance at her and she taps an invisible watch on her wrist and mouths, "It'll be the rush soon."

Stepping towards the customer's table, I notice faint lines resting around her eyes. Fine strands of grey thread through her hair. Her glassy eyes are wide and distant.

I take the cup from her hands and place it on my tray without a sound. She doesn't resist.

I crouch beside her and take her icy hands in mine. Tears spill onto her cheeks.

"How can I help?" I ask, passing her a napkin.

For a moment, she looks at it as though she can't make herself reach for it. Then she slowly takes it and wipes her tear-stained face.

"I want to go home," she exhales in barely a whisper.

"Can I call someone for you?"

She shakes her head in a tiny movement.

"I don't have a home, not really. I'm just staying somewhere. And I don't want to be there right now."

At that moment, I understand: home isn't always the place you live.

I hold her hands in mine and she allows her tears to fall.

My boss calls me over. With her mouth firmly set, she tells me, "An ambulance is on the way. We've done our best."

"Please," I begin. "Can you ask that the ambulance doesn't use a siren?"

She stares at me. A shadow flickers, clouding her expression. Then she huffs.

Tapping her phone screen, she raises it to make a call.

I return to the customer.

Silently, the ambulance arrives. The blue flashing lights blur through the misted glass, blinking like Christmas-tree lights. The customer's fingers tighten around mine