

SWEETBITTER

by

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based on her novel

May 16, 2017

EXT. GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE, TOLLBOOTHS - EARLY MORNING

A TOLLBOOTH LADY, unmovable as an obelisk, is making change mechanically, thoughtlessly. Cars run through. Then a beat with no cars, which seems strange. She looks up as--

An old Volvo slams to a stop in front of her. TESS (22, looks 17, no make up, no sleep, no matter) rolls down the window.

TOLLBOOTH LADY  
Seven dollars.

TESS  
Seriously?

Tess looks at the sign, then back.

TESS (CONT'D)  
That's a lot to get in.

TOLLBOOTH LADY  
Seven dollars.

She rummages through the front seat -- a pair of jeans, strewn books and empty cups. Tess clearly doesn't have it on her. Horns begin to HONK.

TESS  
I didn't know. About the  
tollbooths.  
(genuine embarrassment)  
I mean, I never *thought* about it.

More HORNS. A TRAFFIC COP approaches, sniffing out the problem.

TESS (CONT'D)  
Can't I squeeze through this one  
time?

The tollbooth lady points to a TURNAROUND LANE. Tess can't fucking believe it.

CUT TO:

A SERIES OF QUICK CUTS:

- Tess going back the way she came, pulling off the first exit into the streets on the New Jersey side.
- The Volvo tires screech to a STOP in a parking spot.
- A colorful glass door flies open, a bell DINGS.

- Fingers on a keypad. 2-0. A twenty dollar bill shoots out.  
- CLOSE UP on an ATM screen. A remaining balance: \$146. RACK FOCUS to Tess, her reflection in the screen, reminding herself to breathe.

Pull back to reveal we are in--

INT. DUNKIN DONUTS, NEW JERSEY - DAY

Tess moves to the front of the line

TESS  
Large iced hazelnut coffee?

DUNKIN DONUTS GUY looks at her. Twice.

DUNKIN DOUGHNUTS GUY  
You're back.

TESS  
Excuse me?

DUNKIN DOUGHNUTS GUY  
You were in here yesterday. You got that same coffee.

TESS  
No. I. Did. Not.

Off her impatient, determined look, we SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. TOLLBOOTH, GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE - MOMENTS LATER

TESS  
I'm back. It's me.

Same lane. Same obelisk. Tess triumphantly hands over the seven dollars.

TESS (CONT'D)  
Can I get in now?

She CRANKS a song. ALL MY FRIENDS by LCD Soundsystem and guns the Volvo. As she crosses the bridge into New York, we PRE-LAP a voice:

TESS (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
I don't know what it is, exactly.

INT. ROOM - NIGHT - 2018

An early 30's version of Tess, eyes tired, framed by wrinkles before her time. She is looking just past the camera, talking with a deliberate tone. It's hard to tell if she's happy or sad, safe or unsafe, married or unmarried, sober by choice or because she has to be. All we know for sure? She deeply believes what she's saying:

TESS

It *is* fast money, that's for sure. Loose, slippery bills that inflate and disappear over the course of an evening. It *is* sex. With people you love and hate and don't know and don't know why. And it *is* a job. A transparent one, stripped of all usual ambition. You don't move up, or down for that matter. You wait.

By now the camera WIDENS just enough to see she's sitting at a bar, talking to the BARTENDER behind the bar. She shakes her head, sips her drink as she remembers a time that either shaped, changed or ruined her.

TESS (CONT'D)

One waits. You are a waiter.

TITLE CARD: SWEETBITTER

Followed by a second card...

2006.

And a third card...

SUMMER.

EXT. 16TH STREET, MANHATTAN - DAY

Blindingly bright, hot, humid New York in high summer. Tess emerges from the impersonal Blue Water Grill, bag over her shoulder, help-wanted ad folded in her hand, a handful of resumes rolled up in her bag. She's already sweating on her neck and clavicle.

She opens and closes her mouth, tired of smiling, even more tired of talking.

She looks at her paper. A shit-load of circles, scribbles and notes. Looks like she's been at this all day. Next stop? Just happens to be across the street.

INT. THE RESTAURANT - DAY

CLOSE ON hydrangeas sitting on a table bathed in daylight. Two sets of hands on either side. The chipped polish, ragged cuticles belong to Tess. The manicured, folded set belong to a man. This is HOWARD, 40's, a cultivated, square face stacked on an athletic frame.

HOWARD  
What brings you here?

TESS  
Well, this place seems--

HOWARD  
Not the restaurant.

TESS  
Oh.

HOWARD  
New York.

TESS  
Right.

Tess looks at her hands, fidgets with her cuticles, then puts her hands in her lap.

TESS (CONT'D)  
It's kind of a calling, isn't it?  
New York?

He taps his fingers on the table.

TESS (CONT'D)  
You have nice nails.

HOWARD  
Part of the job. Tell me what you know about wine.

TESS  
The basics. I'm competent in the basics.

HOWARD  
Do you know the five noble grapes of Bordeaux?

No. She does not. She debates lying, but he's already seen through it.

HOWARD (CONT'D)

I'll ask that question differently.  
When you purchase a bottle of wine,  
what do you like?

TESS

Um, that would mean I knew what I  
liked, or could afford it. At this  
point it's really if I like the  
animal on the label. Or not.

He studies her, then looks at her resume.

HOWARD

I thought you had experience...

TESS

It was a coffee shop.

HOWARD

Never in a restaurant? As a server?

TESS

When the food was ready I would  
serve it to customers.

HOWARD

You mean guests.

TESS

Sure. Guests.

Tess privately sighs. He scribbles on top of her resume.

HOWARD

What are you reading?

TESS

Are these normal interview  
questions?

HOWARD

This isn't a normal restaurant.  
You don't know anything about wine,  
don't know anything about service.  
It says here that you were an  
English major. So I am asking--

TESS

Nothing. I'm reading nothing at  
the moment.

She has no idea what he's digging for, but she decides to  
play. She meets his eyes, his level.

TESS (CONT'D)

You know, Howard - if I can call you that - when you move someplace new, you can sort of...take inventory of your life. I *had* all these books...these... I don't know the word, totems? Of who I was, who I wanted to be. And when I looked at them to bring them with me, I felt nothing. So I left them there.

HOWARD

I see.

For the first time, maybe he does sort of see her.

HOWARD (CONT'D)

Do you want to be a writer?

TESS

No.

HOWARD

An actor?

TESS

No.

HOWARD

What do you want to be?

TESS

I don't know.

(then)

I guess I just want to be moved.

He makes another note on her resume.

HOWARD

What do you dislike?

(off her look)

If you like being moved, what do you dislike?

TESS

That question. It's too personal.

HOWARD

Fair enough.

A beat.

HOWARD (CONT'D)

Did you move here with friends? A boyfriend?

TESS

No.

HOWARD

That's very brave.

TESS

Is it? It's been two days and I feel foolish.

HOWARD

It's brave if you make it.

Howard smiles, stands up, indicating that he's finished with the interview. Tess stands up as well.

HOWARD (CONT'D)

Well, thank you.

He extends a warm and gracious hand to her. She can't help but smile.

TESS

Y'know, this isn't the prettiest place...

HOWARD

Is that right?

TESS

No, what I mean is... maybe it's the flowers. Or maybe it's you. You seem to really to believe in it. Either way, the second I walked in here I felt welcome. Even me, from, y'know... nowhere. So thank you.

She shakes his hand. His eyes travel down her body, not like an employer's, but like a man's.

TESS (CONT'D)

You have my resume.

And she walks out.

CUT TO:

The sound of Tess's breathing as Tess climbs the stairs of a fifth floor walk up. She fiddles with a set of keys, enters--



INT. ROEBLING STREET APARTMENT, WILLIAMSBURG - DAY

It's pretty shitty, but not horrendous. One room with a bed, a brown couch with a lamp and a small bookcase. A couple of overly stuffed trash bags sit on the bed. It's fucking hot.

Tess unpacks the contents of her wardrobe, including coins, snow boots, old keys, a bottle of shampoo. She looks for clean underwear and her Converse.

LATER. She stands at her window fanning herself, in her bra and underwear, staring at the building across the way. A LATINO WOMAN sits on the fire escape, drinking a tall boy, smoking cigarettes. She is sick-looking. In the window next to her a little boy is sitting with his face to the window, staring at Tess. She smiles at him. He gives her a thumbs up and she realizes what she's wearing.

EXT. WILLIAMSBURG/PHONE BOOTH, NIGHT (DUSK)

Tess drinks a beer huddled in a phone booth, puts a quarter in. As it rings she watches the lights coming on in the city across the river, people rushing by her down Bedford Avenue, faint merengue in the background. A deep BREATH as someone answers on the other end.

TESS

It's me.

A beat. She listens. Chooses her words carefully.

TESS (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I should have said something, but... goodbyes aren't my thing.

She takes a swig of the beer, or two.

TESS (CONT'D)

Yeah, found a place to live, and a job. Some restaurant. It's temporary. Fine for now.

She's self-conscious of every word.

TESS (CONT'D)

You're okay?

The line goes DEAD. Into the SILENT phone:

TESS (CONT'D)

Okay.

Tess stays in the phone booth, rests her forehead on the glass. As the city continues to turn dark, we--

FADE OUT.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Tess enters for her first day of work, passes the hostess stand and a FLOWER GIRL delivering a spectacular new batch of hydrangeas. As Tess passes, it's like walking through a cloud.

She passes the bar area where a BAR BACK and a SERVER eye her. Tess smiles. They have no response. She can still hear them after she passes:

BAR BACK

Bet she has a lot of experience.

SERVER

At *what* would be my question.

INT. LOCKER ROOM, RESTAURANT - DAY

Painted all white, metal lockers, a sink, mirrors, multiple fans going. It's also a storage closet for the restaurant (chairs, booster seats, linens).

CLOSE ON Tess's eyes in a small locker mirror watching blurry people in striped shirts (red, navy, pink) moving behind her. The sounds comes in, din of CONVERSATIONS she can barely make out. She finishes buttoning a white button down shirt, already sweating, when--

WILL (O.S.)

You done primping?

Tess spins. WILL, late 20's, kind, but something Midwest and militant about him. Tess pulls her hair into a messy ponytail.

TESS

I'm primped.

WILL

(not psyched)

Less than two hours until first sitting. Follow me and don't touch anything, don't do anything unless I tell you. And you're gonna be fucked on barmops.

(MORE)

WILL (CONT'D)

There aren't enough and I'm not telling you where I hide mine because I have no fucking clue how long you'll actually be here.

TESS

Bar mops. Got it.  
(puts out her hand)  
I'm --

WILL

I know who you are. The new girl.  
Don't forget to clock in.

And we're on the move. Tess follows Will down a spiral metal staircase that leads to--

THE KITCHEN, passing the hot line, cold line, dry storage, dishwashing station, etc. Everything stainless steel and white, very clean and organized.

WILL (CONT'D)

49% of the job is the shit anyone can do. Memorize table numbers, stack plates along your arm, know every menu item and their ingredients, never spill a drop of wine, never let the water levels drop, bus the tables cleanly, mise-en-place, fire orders...

Tess is absorbed by the pure motion around her. Plates of food flying by her face, everything luscious, colorful, pristine.

WILL (CONT'D)

Know the origins of the tuna, every basic grape variety, pair a wine with the foie gras, what cheese is pasteurized, what contains gluten, what contains nuts, where the extra straws are, how to count. Oh, and how to show up on time.

TESS

What's the rest of it?

WILL

The 51%. The hard part.

SOUS CHEF (O.S.)

Need a follow!

Will STOPS. Tess, on his heels, nearly collides into him.

WILL

Shit. Don't move. Following, Chef!

He grabs two hot plates and RACES away. Tess backs up against the wall, alone, unsure, picking at her cuticles. There's a window to a walk-in next to her. She looks inside, sees--

SOMEONE CRYING. This is SASHA. More on him later, but he's behind a hanging pig carcass, sobbing. Their eyes meet for a faint moment before--

WILL (CONT'D)

Hand out of your mouth. Let's go,  
unless you don't want to eat?!?

She's back on Will's tail and follows him through a labyrinth of ice machines, dry goods storage and prep areas until they step through a door and into--

INT. BACK DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The "family" meal. Tables have been pushed together to form one long banquet. The entire staff -- SERVERS, HOSTS, KITCHEN BOYS, DISHWASHERS, etc. -- all colors, shapes and sizes -- performing, snapping, clapping, kissing, cutting each other off. Layers of noise that OVERWHELM and THRILL Tess at once as she overhears SNIPPETS of conversation:

"Took the LSAT, then was like, I don't want to be a lawyer."

"The sardines are insane tonight."

"I'd fuck the mom."

"Have you been to Ssam Bar yet?"

"I'm playing a show Wednesday."

"It's true. Chef called him a faggot."

"He texted *Bellvue* but he meant *Brooklyn*."

"So now it's Ethio-Jazz for the masses?"

"Where are the treats?"

She makes a plate of food, follows Will to the table. People look at her, a sea of striped shirts and inquisitive eyes. She's about to sit when--

WILL

No, no. You're on salt shakers.

Will nods toward a table in the corner, a two top with one chair. There's a container of salt and an army of salt shakers.

WILL (CONT'D)

Fill, wipe down and dry off. Easy  
enough?

TESS

Wipe them down with...  
 (off his look of "duh")  
 Bar mop. Got it.

He goes to the banquet table. Tess sits with her food at the SALT TABLE. Takes a deep breath, looks around for a bar mop. No sign of one. She takes a quick bite of foods, starts filling salt shakers until she hears--

The TINGLING of wine glasses. She looks up to see all the servers passing around tastes of red wine. A bottle wrapped in brown paper is being passed.

Howard enters. CLAPS twice and everyone goes SILENT. This seems like a nightly ritual.

HOWARD

Who would like to begin?

In unison, servers put their noses into their glasses and inhale.

SERVER 1

Is it off?

SERVER 2

No it's just old.

WILL

Old world for sure, pinot,  
 obviously.

SERVER 1

I'm still getting wet socks.

SERVER 2

Those are your actual socks.

SERVER 1

Fuck off, I think it's corked.

SIMONE (O.S.)

No. It's perfect.

Tess leans forward to see who spoke with such authority. Everyone hushes, looks toward SIMONE (age impossible to tell, imperious, hair that wisps out from her face like a 70's rock goddess). She swirls her wine quickly in her glass, pulls it to her nose and away.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

What a treat, Howard. The Geverney  
 Chambertin. Harmond Geoffrey.

(MORE)

SIMONE (CONT'D)  
The 2000. It's showing quite well,  
surprising given the vintage.

Simone puts the wine down and hasn't taken a sip. Tess notices two girls, HEATHER and ARIEL roll their eyes. Howard grins at Simone.

HOWARD  
Agreed. Friends, this wine is a steal. As far as gifts go, pass it on to your guests tonight.

Everyone rises. Howard walks off, passing Tess.

TESS  
(brightly)  
Hi Howard!

He glances at her quickly and nods slightly, but doesn't break stride. She feels a touch of rejection. Then--

CLANK. And CLANK. Ariel and Heather drop their empty plates on Tess's full one. Others follow suit, leaving her with a stack of heavy, dirty plates.

She doesn't know what to do, but instinctually she decides to abandon the salt for a moment. She lifts the plates and follow the crowd through he swinging doors into--

THE KITCHEN. Tess stops, not sure where to turn. A passing SERVER mutters:

SERVER (O.S.)  
She doesn't know what a dishwasher looks like?

Tess spots a TROUGH with dirty dishes that runs the length of the room, sets her stack down apologetically. PAPI, a thousand years old, is behind the trough with a hose. He HUFFS and takes the stack, scraping the food into a trash can.

GRAY-HAIRED MAN  
Pinche idiota.

He SPITS into the trough.

TESS  
Thank you?

She SPINS away, knowing she needs to get back to the salt, when she spots--

A BAR MOP. One isolated bar mop, just sitting on the edge of stainless steel counter. She makes a SUDDEN move for it, but--  
She slams into someone. A bare arm, not in a striped shirt.

JAKE  
Jesus, *behind* you.

She looks up at JAKE, 30, longish brown hair, pale blue eyes, wearing a sweated-through white t-shirt that sticks to his shoulders. She can see his tattoos through his shirt. He's holding his bike and breathing hard.

JAKE (CONT'D)  
Did I hurt you?

Tess realizes she's still touching his arm. She pulls her hand back as if shocked.

TESS  
No. You didn't hurt me.

Jake looks her up and down. Kitchen noises come back in.

JAKE  
What are you?

Tess holds his eyes.

TESS  
I'm new.

SIMONE (O.S.)  
Jake.

Tess and Jake turn. Simone is standing in the kitchen doors, looking directly at Jake.

SIMONE (CONT'D)  
Good morning, my love. What time does your shift start?

JAKE  
(kindly)  
Oh fuck off, Simone.

SIMONE  
(a mild smile)  
I have your plate. Get changed.

Jake grunts and heads up the stairs to the locker room with his bike.

Simone stays and stares at Tess and her bar mop, as if waiting for her to say something. Tess looks at her hands and then looks back up, frozen.

Simone approaches her, comes very close, studying her. Tess's hair has fallen out of her ponytail.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

Turn around.

Tess is unsure, but turns. Simone takes out her hair band, and pulls Tess's hair back again. It's intimate but not totally gentle. She spins Tess back around.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

Ignore him. Do you understand?

And she walks off into the dining room. Tess watches her go, shaking off the enormous feeling of intimidation that woman gives her. She needs to get back to the salt, starts in that direction when she sees--

SASHA, no longer crying, flirting with the boys in Spanish, eating chicken liver mousse out of a quart container with his fingers. They are gathered around the staff COFFEE MACHINE that appears to be broken.

SASHA

What?

TESS

Nothing. I worked at a place with one of those.

She walks over, pops the lid off, rearranges the filter, hits it on the side. It works. Now she looks to Sasha:

TESS (CONT'D)

Are you doing ok?

Everyone looks at Sasha. He narrows his eyes at Tess, embarrassed and rageful.

SASHA

What the fuck you mean Am *I* ok? I'm not looking ok? *You* ok? I'm thinking looking better than you, little cunt.

TESS

I'm sorry. I thought--

Will RACES in, looking for Tess.



WILL  
 Sasha, my prince, you look better  
 than everyone. It's your curse.  
 (to Tess)  
 Didn't I tell you..?

He drags her away, winding through the labryrinth.

TESS  
 I'm sorry. I thought--

WILL  
 Don't think. Just listen.

TESS  
 Okay. The salt.

She's about to go to the Back Dining room and get back to the salt shakers, but Will veers her in a different direction.

WILL  
 No. Small emergency. Bar needs  
 Sherry. Neely's here.

They quickly step into--

INT. WINE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Will scans an enormous wine racks for a particular bottle.

WILL  
 Normally I wouldn't let you touch  
 anything but I have forty-five to  
 break down this palette...  
 (urgently scanning racks)  
 Where the hell is the...?

Tess watches him, feels her ponytail.

TESS  
 There was a woman. Just now...  
 She was in the family meal.

WILL  
 Did she sound like she belongs in a  
 Chekhov play?

TESS  
 Yes.

WILL  
 Treat you like a retarded five-year-  
 old?

TESS  
Sort of. Yes.

WILL  
Simone.  
(finds the bottle)  
Boom!

He grabs a bottle of Sherry off the shelf.

WILL (CONT'D)  
Take this to the bar. Hand it to  
Nicky and say it's for Mrs. Neely.  
Then come right back.

TESS  
What is it?

WILL  
Can you just follow the fucking  
instructions?

Tess takes the bottle, hurries out of the wine room.

WILL (CONT'D)  
Wait.

Tess stops short, turns back to Will. He has a warning:

WILL (CONT'D)  
Simone is not your friend.

Tess takes this in, then heads for--

INT. BAR, THE RESTAURANT - EVENING

Tess finds her way to the front bar where NICKY (40, bowtie, Clark-Kent-glasses, unpretentious Long Island accent) is readying the bar for opening.

TESS  
This is for Mrs. Neely.

NICKY  
She's on ten.

He means a table. Tess stands there.

NICKY (CONT'D)  
Her soup is getting cold.

TESS  
I don't understand.

NICKY

The black bean soup. With a side of  
sherry. You. Pour. The Sherry. In.  
The. Soup.

TESS

(a whisper)  
I don't think I'm allowed to do  
that.

NICKY

(whispers back)  
My three-year-old can do that.  
(then)  
Here. And here.

He hands her a tray, puts a shot glass on it. Tess puts the  
sherry on a tray and heads for--

TABLE 10, where MRS. NEELY, nearing 90, is asleep at the  
Table, head thrown back, mouth open, like on an airplane. She  
is dolled up in stockings, high heels and a hat. Tess CLEARS  
her throat. Mrs. Neely doesn't move. Tess bites her lip. Is  
Mrs. Neely dead?

Tess balances the tray in one hand and uses the other hand to  
reach out to touch her shoulder.

TESS

Mrs. Neely?

Her eyes open, she sits up straight, like nothing's wrong.  
She looks to Tess, then the tray.

MRS. NEELY

Perfect. One for the soup, one for  
me.

She means the Sherry. Tess puts the whole tray on the table,  
pulls the cork out hard. She steadies her breath and hands as  
she pours the sherry into the shot glass, then into the soup.  
Mrs. Neely smiles.

That calms Tess for a moment, glad she's accomplished  
*something* today. Now she pours a glass of Sherry for Mrs.  
Neely and sets it down in front of her.

TESS

All set?

MRS. NEELY

Sit down.

Tess looks around, confused. Mrs. Neely bends forward, frail, and tries to pull a chair out for Tess.

MRS. NEELY (CONT'D)  
Come on. Ain't no good always  
eating alone.

Tess understands. She sits. Mrs. Neely sips her soup. Tess watches.

TESS  
I love your outfit.

MRS. NEELY  
(touches her hat)  
I used to wear this at Le Pavillon.  
Henri Soule, that bastard, he ran  
the door like a dictator. But I  
went, every night after the show.  
Everyone did.

TESS  
What show is that?

MRS. NEELY  
I was a Rockette at Radio City.  
That's why I still have these legs.

She pulls her skirt up to reveal her thighs, and does a small kick. Tess grins.

MRS. NEELY (CONT'D)  
Did my soup come?

TESS  
Um. Yes. That's your... right  
there.

MRS. NEELY  
Not that soup. That's not my soup.  
Where is MY soup?!?

TESS  
(reaching out a hand)  
Mrs. Neely--

MRS. NEELY  
Don't touch me, Simone.

Tess pulls her hand back.

TESS  
I'm not--

HOWARD  
 (quickly appearing)  
 Mrs. Neely, your soup is on it's  
 way. Chef made it especially for  
 you.

Howard clears the bowl of soup currently in front of Mrs. Neely, turns to Tess, quietly:

HOWARD (CONT'D)  
 Take this back to the kitchen, ask  
 the chef to refire. And stay there.

He hands her the bowl with one hand, his other hand going to her waist, turning her around gently, possibly too gently, and starting her on her way back to--

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Tess SLAMS through the doors, a little soup spilling on her hands. It burns and she pauses, biting her lip. ARIEL, late 20s, stick thin, tons of eyeliner, hair piled up on her head is cutting butter.

TESS  
 Hi, I need to refire, I don't know.

ARIEL  
 (yells to Chef)  
 Refire, Chef, black bean. Table 10!

Ariel goes back to cutting butter. Tess is rattled.

TESS  
 That woman, I think she's--

ARIEL  
 (cold)  
 What? Our guest? A beloved fucking  
 guest who takes the bus here from  
 Harlem twice a week so she can  
 she can feel part of the world  
 again?

Ariel looks her up and down, disgusted.

ARIEL (CONT'D)  
 I'll run it. You're bleeding.

Tess looks down and her shirt is has a STAIN of blood. She's confused, unsure if it's even hers, until she sees one of her cuticles is cut.

TESS  
 (starting to lose it)  
 Fuuuck.

She races off, but is unsure where to turn. Suddenly, someone slides their arm in hers and walks lock-step with her to--

A SINK that's in a private corner of the kitchen.

SASHA  
 Rinse.

She rinses off her finger. He pulls a band aid out of his pocket, starts putting it on Tess's finger, not looking her in the eye.

SASHA (CONT'D)  
 My father died.

TESS  
 Oh.  
 (a beat)  
 Why are you at work?

SASHA  
 Because he in shithole Russia and not all-star American Daddy like Baby Monster's.

TESS  
 Who's Baby Monster?

SASHA  
 You obviously a Baby Monster. You fucking thinking I'm blind?

He finishes the band aid, eyes her shirt.

SASHA (CONT'D)  
 There Russian secret to get blood out of shirt.

TESS  
 Okay...

SASHA  
 Steal new one. Take stairs, pass red door, two cupboards over the head, look after the reject plates, and voila. But don't fucking touch my queen bar mops or I cut your throat and I not a joker.

Tess nods, then looks back to Sasha.

TESS

Sometimes it's a relief, right? At least when they're gone you have somewhere to put the hurt.

She heads for the stairs. Sasha looks after her, surprised.

INT. OFFICES AND STORAGE, THIRD FLOOR - EVENING

A flurry of activity as everyone readies for opening. ON TESS, below it all, on her knees inside a cabinet, moving aside a bunch of china plate samples, dust everywhere.

She finds a ball of white shirts, pulls one out, holds one up to herself. It's huge. They're all men's LARGE.

INT. LOCKER ROOM, NIGHT

Tess in the full length mirror, trying to tuck in the huge shirt but it's bunched and unflattering. She decides to tie it up, showing a touch of midriff. Will EXPLODES into the locker room, sees Tess looking in the mirror.

WILL

Primping AGAIN?!? You've got to be kidding--

TESS

No--

WILL

You know you're not hired yet, don't you?

Off her look. She does not know this.

WILL (CONT'D)

You have to pass your trails. I grade you at the end of the night. Did you seriously sit at table 10? For real?!? God...

He BOLTS out of the locker room, Tess right behind him. We CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM MEZZANINE - NIGHT

A massive tray of candles being lit by two servers, casting a gorgeous GLOW. When they're done, they lift the trays and head for the dining room, passing--

TESS as she folds starched white napkins as quickly and precisely as she can. It's hard. They need to be perfect. *Crease, turn, crease, fold, fan, FUCK.* It's a little lopsided. She starts over, feeling the pressure to perform. She sneaks a look at WILL, who watches her, ready for her to make *one more* mistake.

ON ARIEL AND HEATHER, there as well, also folding napkins. They have it down to a rapid science: *Crease-turn-crease-fold-fan.* Like it's nothing. They are also proficient at restaurant gossip. They eye Tess.

ARIEL

(not so quietly)

Just what we need, more of Howard's girls. The ones who go *poof* in the night when he's done with them.

Tess tries to keep folding, keep focused.

HEATHER

This one's a backwaiter.

ARIEL

(skeptical, at Tess)

For now.

Tess hears something below. Her eyes dart off the mezzanine to the RESTAURANT FLOOR, where--

JAKE AND SIMONE at the end of the bar. He is hunched over his plate of food, Simone talking and helping him with his side-work. They're talking in an intimate way, like they are attached far underneath the surface of the restaurant.

As Simone enters info into the computer, Jake comes behind her and puts his head on her shoulder, as if banging his head against a wall. Simone laughs. Tess wonders if they are together.

ARIEL (CONT'D)

Do you know how to talk?

Now Tess looks at them, sharply.

TESS

I can talk.

ARIEL

Relief.

HEATHER

She's shell-shocked.



ARIEL  
She's retarded.

TESS  
I can hear. Also.

HEATHER  
These are wrong, princess.

She sticks her gum into a napkin on Tess's pile and knocks the stack over. Will SIGHS.

WILL  
Where are the treats, Ari? This is going to be a long fucking night.

Ariel produces small blue and orange pills out of an Altoids container in her pocket. Tess eyes them.

ARIEL  
Not for you, Skipper.

WILL  
Definitely not for you. Just go put out the salt shakers.

ON TESS. Gulp.

WILL (CONT'D)  
You finished them, right?

Fuuuuck.

TESS  
Yes.

WILL  
Go.

Tess runs down the stairs.

INT. BACK DINING ROOM - A MOMENT LATER

Tess races into the room where the family meal was earlier, and it's TRANSFORMED. Tables are all dressed for dinner with tablecloths and silverware. Tess looks to the table where she left the salt trays. They are gone.

TESS  
Fucking fuck.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tess SPRINTS into the kitchen, looking in every direction, in a panic. Never did a salt tray mean so much. Then she spots--

SIMONE. She has the salt tray sitting on a lowboy, where she calmly polishes the last salt shaker.

TESS  
(out of breath)  
I was looking for...

SIMONE  
Me?

TESS  
No.  
(nervous)  
I mean, not not you. Just...

She eyes the salt tray as Simone finishes polishing the shaker, places it in the tray.

SIMONE  
What did you and Mrs. Neely talk about?

TESS  
How does everybody..? Look, I know it was wrong, but--

SIMONE  
But what?

TESS  
That woman needs help. She's lonely.

SIMONE  
What do you know about being lonely?

TESS  
You don't know me.

SIMONE  
("yes I do")  
Okay.

Simone takes a tube of lipstick out of her pocket and applies it slowly, looking at herself in stainless steel, speaking and transforming herself at the same time.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

You took this job because you thought it was easy. Because you have no self-awareness and have gotten by on your looks so long that you haven't developed a character. But that soft mind won't work here. You'll be back to whatever sad story you came from in a week and you will have missed the opportunity to become a person.

Her lipstick is done. She's ready to take the floor for the night. She picks up the tray, hands it to Tess.

SIMONE (CONT'D)

It's not just salt.

Simone presses her lips together, smooths out her apron, and walks out into the dining room.

INT. LOCKER ROOM BATHROOM - NIGHT

Tess leaning over the sink breathing hard, red. Tears and mascara smeared all over her face. She grabs paper towels and tries to blot her face.

She drops down onto the toilet, defeated, puts her head in her hands.

OLDER TESS (O.S.)

I think it was Nicky who told me that life is what happens when you're waiting.

Tess rises to the mirror, taking deep breaths, tucking her massive shirt in. Simone is right - she is trying to become a person.

OLDER TESS (O.S.) (CONT'D)

I laughed at that, rolled my eyes. But she was right. There is no such thing as waiting. It all matters.

INT. RESTAURANT, KITCHEN

Tess coming down the stairs slowly, holding the rail to steady herself, descending into the noise. She's UNDERWATER, everything feels far. She's looking around for what to do next, spins in a slow circle.

The layers of NOISE now OVERTAKE her -- every CLANG and BANG of the kitchen AMPLIFIED, the SNIPPETS of conversation attacking her like rapid gunfire:

"30 needs attention."  
 "Style triumphed over content."  
 "I'm weeded."  
 "Move them!"  
 "Stalin was an angel in comparison."  
 "It's too rare, even for me."  
 "What did she expect?"  
 "Three fucking turns!"  
 "There are a million theories on Purgatory."  
 "On a Tuesday."

Her eyes rest on:

- Ice cream on the counter of the pastry station, beading sweat, melting.
- A tiny woman with a cleaver, blood all over her apron.
- Tongs flipping a hanger steak, the sizzle of meat.
- A boy with glasses picking parsley from stems.
- Scott's (the sous chef) tattooed hand stabbing tickets.
- A line cook dousing a plate of heirloom tomatoes with Maldon salt.

                  OLDER TESS (O.S.)  
 Don't worry, you'll develop a  
 palate.

INT. DARK BAR - TEN YEARS LATER

Adult Tess swirls her wine in mid-air, looking at it, appraising it. A bus boy appears, folding her napkin with an air of deference. Her blouse is silk, her jewelry gold. She nods politely at the busboy and looks up to her bartender...

                  OLDER TESS  
                   (with a rueful smile)  
 And I'm not talking about the food.

He's young, tattooed, reminiscent of Jake. She drains her drink.

                  OLDER TESS (V.O.)  
 What's your name again?

INT. THE RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Young Tess, hair a mess, shirt a mess, exits the bathroom and pauses in the kitchen. All sound cuts out. As if in her ear, she hears:

JAKE  
Hey, new girl. I'm in here.

INT. RESTAURANT/WALK-IN

Jake stands in the doorway of a walk-in, holding lemon wedges. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, showing the edges of tattoos.

TESS  
Are you allowed to be in there?

Jake holds the door of walk in with one arm

JAKE  
Do you like oysters?

A beat. Tess thinks about it.

TESS  
I don't know.

JAKE  
An oyster virgin?

Jake is laughing at her with his eyes. She looks behind her, to see if anyone is watching, and walks under his arm into the walk-in.

TESS  
I think I like them.

Tess is inside the seafood walk-in - tubs of salmon, cod, tuna fillets. Crates labeled with masking tape: "Wellfleet," "Blue Points," "Kumamotos."

TESS (CONT'D)  
Are we going to get locked in?

Jake pulls the heavy door closed. There's no sound from the restaurant, just the hum of the refrigerator. It's startlingly quiet and intimate. He puts the lemons down and Tess sees two beers. He pops the caps off.

Tess is watching his hands, his arms.

TESS (CONT'D)  
You have tattoos.

Jake ignores her. She reaches into a crate and pulls out two tiny rocks, dirty, covered with seaweed, which he wipes off quickly.

TESS (CONT'D)  
They look filthy.

JAKE  
They're a secret. A leap of faith.

Jake pulls an oyster knife out of his pocket, wedges the tip into a crack.

JAKE (CONT'D)  
Slip them into your mouth. Barely  
chew it. Hold it, then swallow.  
Understand?

He breaks the shells apart and runs the knife under the oyster to cut the muscle, expertly.

TESS  
(Like he performed magic)  
Where'd you learn to do that?

Jake pinches a lemon over the oysters.

JAKE  
Quickly.

Tess picks up the shell and looks at it, scared. She puts her lips to it and then flips the oyster into her mouth quickly. She shuts her eyes. JUMP TO ---

Quick Shots:

- Tess plunges into seawater.
- barnacles on the pilings of an old wooden pier.
- Gulls circling, floating, barking against a gray sky.
- Boats knocking against docks.
- A tide pulling out across sand.

TESS (V.O.)  
Briny. Made by the ocean. Breathing  
seawater. Metallic. Musky. Kelp. My  
mouth like a fishing wharf.  
Swallow, Now, Ignore, Him --

JUMP BACK ---

INT. RESTAURANT/WALK-IN

Tess opens her eyes. Jake is holding a bear up in front of her which she grabs and chugs quickly. She pants slightly, looking down. She takes another drink of the beer, not looking at him.

Tess looks at him. She smiles. She's all in.

TESS  
Can I have another?

HARD TO BLACK.

End of pilot episode

