

Katie McClain
J 2400
Researched Personal Story

A day in the life

The floor is sticky. Again. Kenny wants more coffee. He may explode with this cup. It has to be his fiftieth refill. Doesn't he have something else to do today? The family in booth three needs a high chair. All of the high chairs are occupied right now except the one covered in oatmeal from an hour ago. That's going to be gross. I have to clean it fast. No one wants their "little precious" to sit in a sticky high-chair. Refills for table two are up, and now they want dessert, hot fudge cake with ice cream on the side. I take their orders and give the slip to the Dairy Girl. I clean the sticky oatmeal off of the high-chair with what very well may be an equally dirty rag. I find a mop and clean the floor beneath. Again. I put the mop away in the cleaning closet at the back of the restaurant. I close the door behind me. Deep breath. One more. Inhaling all of the cleaning supplies may not be such a good idea, but at least it's quiet in here. I can think for a second. Orders run through my mind. So many people, so much food, cleaning to do, money practically being thrown at me as customers rush out the door, having lingered a bit too long. A muffled plea on the other side of the door means someone needs something. Another deep breath. I step out of the closet, smile securely in place. Diners would expect nothing less of their waitress at the Dairy Yum Yum, the best and only restaurant in town.

I got a job at Dairy Yum Yum, in my hometown of Ripley, Ohio, the summer before my sophomore year of high school and worked there for almost three years. Less than a mile from the school and less than a ten-minute drive from my house, this was the perfect job for a girl who needed to save money. For college. For a job. For giggles. The Dairy, as it's known, is tiny dairy bar and diner open from 4 a.m. until 10 p.m. every day but Christmas, and it's usually at

capacity, even on Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve. It's rather small, with twelve tables shoved into what used to be storage space. On any given day, the restaurant is overflowing inside and people are lined up outside the walk-up window. The Dairy Yum Yum sits on US Route 52 between the highway and the river. From the windows, you can see trees that line the river, but in the fall and winter as the leaves fall, you can see glimpses of the water and the occasional coal barge making its way upstream. The Dairy sits on the east edge of town, but residents of the small town travel the extra few minutes for a milkshake or cup of coffee.

The owner, Crystal Cannon, inherited The Dairy from her uncle who inherited it from a friend. Its roots can be traced back almost fifty years. The Dairy Yum Yum II in the next town, Aberdeen, was opened fifteen years ago, and receives almost as much business, but has a better view of the Ohio River. The Dairy II is run by Crystal's sister, Cathy. Crystal is everything one would picture in a female entrepreneur. She comes in early to start the grill and then returns at closing time to count out the register. She's on call every hour of every day. With short brown hair, a thicker middle, and a voice that can be heard miles away, Crystal fills a room on her own. Always complaining about her "marriage" to The Dairy, she still refuses to take a vacation. Some days are busier than others, but as long as the customers leave tips, I don't mind. I started out as a Dairy Girl, in charge of all desserts. And like any good dairy bar, The Dairy features eight types of ice cream, a soft-serve machine, and homemade pies and cakes daily.

I started working in June. It was warm my first day, and like any good employee, I wanted to look cute on my first day. I wore a new shirt bought the week before. It was white with a bright blue design on the front. I wore jeans, and my new bright white tennis shoes that squeaked when I walked because they hadn't been broken in yet. School had not been out more than a week, and people were already settling into a routine for summertime. Four of my classmates appeared at

the window asking for large milkshakes. No big deal, right? My trainer, a friend, quickly scribbled the order, entered it into the cash register, and handed out change. She showed me how to put an adequate amount of soft-serve ice cream, milk, and flavoring into an obscenely large Styrofoam cup. She spun the first two under the machine, then handed me the cup. It looked easy. I was mistaken. The first cup all but split in half as it hit the metal spinner inside the machine. I had to scoop out the contents and start again. As it was thoroughly mixed, I pulled the cup down and away from the machine. The machine was still on, and it sprayed chocolate milkshake all over me, my trainer, and the wall. Awesome.

My new shirt became my milkshake shirt. Even years after I started there, most of my work shirts had a clear line: chocolate milkshakes of the past remind me exactly where I'm from.

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Ripley, Ohio is an itty-bitty river town with fewer than 2,000 people. My friends from out of town always want to drive down to the river and see if they can see coal barges, paddle wheel boats, or people on jet skis. Most of the time, especially in the summer, we have something to look at. Ripley doesn't get many tourists, but mostly cars passing through on their way to Portsmouth or Cincinnati, and Ripley is the half-way point. These passersby might drive down to the river, have lunch at The Dairy and then make their way to their destination. They might notice the cute little buildings that sell antiques or crafts, the houses that decorate for every season, holiday and home basketball game. They might drive by the enormous library surrounded by even larger churches and a bar or two. They might notice the park that always has someone playing on the swings, both youngsters and old-timers. But they always notice the river.

Ripley, right across the river from Maysville, Kentucky, has a history rich in the Underground Railroad, and everyone feels we don't have nearly as many tourists as we should.

The bicentennial of Ripley is in 2012, and as a National Historic District, Ohio's history buffs flock to the center of town to stare at the World War II canon that sits in front of the library. It was never fired. Ripley is home to one high school with fewer than 400 students, whose parents live in the surrounding area and own farmland famous for producing tobacco. Every August, the town shuts down Front Street, along the river, and sets up food booths, raffles, games, and contests to celebrate The Ohio Tobacco Festival.

In 2008, the festival was in its 15th year, and it seemed that everyone came downtown to celebrate. Working my shift at the Dairy Yum Yum, I see the uptick in traffic and milkshake sales. What used to be a celebration of a plant has turned into a celebration of the town. It's no longer just about tobacco, but what makes Ripley great instead. The Ohio Tobacco Festival is also prime tip time for a waitress at the Dairy, and everyone makes enough money to last for the next three months. On my break, I take a tour of the town to see what's going on. It's in late August, so school is about to start, but college kids haven't left yet. Skoal, Marlboro, and Redman booths line Main Street giving out free samples to anyone with an I.D. The smell of cigarette smoke invades the town mixes and with the humidity and grease of the food booths in a way that can only be described as nauseating. But somehow, an ice cream sundae sounds delicious to everyone in the crowd tonight. This year, the festival has crept closer to the river, where under the picnic shelters, tobacco stripping, judging, and spitting contests are held. I witness the mayor hack up enough juices to spit, and it makes most re-think that sundae choice, but he wins the contest and holds up his trophy to smile for the local paper, a jaw full of dip still in his mouth. The Ripley Bee will print that picture for sure along with its normal three-page spread about the festival and its various festivities. The other page is for the news, of course, if there is any this week. The caption will read, "Mayor Tom Leonard wins the spittin' contest for

the fifth year in a row.” Mayor Leonard doesn’t look much like a mayor in his ripped jeans, dirty boots, and t-shirt. He wears a John Deere hat to compliment his five o’clock shadow, but the grin on his face is priceless, and supremely newsworthy.

A quick left turn leads me to the games. There are a few rides for the little kids, mostly a carousel and bumper cars, games where customers can win fish or stuffed animals, and more food booths. My favorite booth is at the very end. They serve orange shake-ups and margaritas. If I’m lucky, they won’t hear me right and give me one of each. I take my shake-up and continue on. Front and center with a picturesque river backdrop is the stage where the queen contest is being held. The stage is much larger than necessary, with chipping red paint and a new sign on the front each year. Up to 10 local, teenage girls compete year after year to be named Ohio Tobacco Festival Queen. They introduce themselves and smile as they prance across stage in their formal dresses. The contest features an interview section, swimsuit competition, and more introductions. No knowledge of tobacco is necessary, as ironic as that is. This year’s queen is Katherine Weathers, a tall lanky girl from a neighboring town. She wears a shimmery red dress, too much makeup, and has hair from the 1980s, a perfect Tobacco Festival Queen. She’s very excited to travel Ohio and represent tobacco. She plans to head to the Moonshine Festival first. I turn around and head back toward The Dairy via the river. As a Dairy Girl, I’ll have to make those sundaes.

Now the view of the river at sunset, especially from a boat, can make someone want to stay in Ripley forever. Most residents do. If you walk up Front Street and look at the river and the houses along the riverbank, it looks like something out of a magazine. They have large front porches, perfect for sitting and looking at the river. The very last house on the street is now a museum. It holds Ripley’s past, a gift box of white paint and black shutters.

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Crystal pops in and out of The Dairy all day long as she checks on her staff and even to grab lunch. One wintery Saturday, she and a regular patron started discussing Ripley's history. Again, the Rev. Jim Settles frequents the Dairy almost daily, and always comes in on Saturday afternoons after his shift at the Parker House, usually ready to unload on anyone the history of the town. Even if we've heard it half a dozen times. He is middle-aged, short, and has a speckled gray mustache that almost looks like paint. The Rev. Settles takes pride in his appearance and always wears dress pants and a button-down shirt. Sometimes on the weekend, he drives his wife to The Dairy and wears a flat cap like a real taxi man. He takes pride in his life, and has a passion for his heritage as an African-American. The Rev. Settles is one of the curators who leads tours, maintains the grounds, and raises awareness about the two historic places of Ripley: The Rankin and Parker Houses. Crystal, like most Ripley residents is easily fascinated by the town's history and is captivated by Rev. Settles, so she'll stick around for a while today.

He begins to tell her the story. These houses of Rankin and Parker were homes of abolitionists in the times of slavery. The Reverend John Rankin was a preacher at Ripley's First Presbyterian Church and was a very vocal advocate for abolitionists of the Ohio Valley. The church still has copies of sermons that Rankin preached. The Rankin House sits on the hill to the north of the town. From the top of the hill, the entire town is visible. As an elementary school field trip, all of the fourth graders are allowed to walk up town and climb the steps that lead to Rankin Hill. With what feels like thousands of steps, but really only comes out to be a little over 100. The wooden steps have been repaired over the years, but they lead from the streets of the town all the way to the front door of the house. It is said that the some 2,000 slaves that escaped slavery through Ripley stayed with the Rankin family on their way to freedom. These steps today

are known as The Freedom Stairs. Fourth graders hear the story of Eliza, a young, black mother who traveled across the frozen river with her infant in only a simple dress, running from her captors. Once she reached the bank, she looked up and saw a candle on the top of a hill. She followed the light and was welcomed by the Rankin family. Harriet Beecher Stowe tells the story a bit better in her book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Students can tour the house today as it is preserved as a museum. The Parker House was home to John Parker, a former slave who purchased his freedom and worked as a blacksmith on the bank of the Ohio River, secretly helping slaves escape from the shores of Kentucky.

The Rev. Settles and his wife, Linda, are a dream couple for a waitress. I am so glad they sat in my section today, even if they kept Crystal around for an extra hour talking about history. They are patient, don't complain about the food or service, and always leave a nice tip. They look at me when they order, and always thank me, even if it's for grabbing them a few extra napkins. Other customers, though, aren't the nicest. In my experience the younger the customer is, the bigger the attitude he has. After their scrimmages on December Saturdays, like this one, it is popular for the team and its biggest fans to come into The Dairy to celebrate a win or soothe the sting of loss with milkshakes.

And here they come again, all at once. A typical waitress would predict great tips and a good time. Any Dairy Yum Yum worker cringes. The basketball team consists of 15 guys who are sweaty, tired and typically cranky. They grumble their orders, mostly small milkshakes, small fries, and an order of onion rings. They bring exact change and never tip. The expectation is that since I go to school with these Neanderthals that they don't have to tip.

Their posse consists of most of the cheerleading squad, who order water, and some parents who complain about the coach. Coach Kennedy avoids The Dairy on game days for this

reason. Some of the guys on the team may get pumped up for the next game, discuss where to go the next weekend for a party, or ask what our English Literature homework was, but for the most part, I am invisible unless someone's cup gets empty. I clean the other booths and counter while they talk about the latest gossip. In such a small town, it's hard to escape such things. Someone will eventually get hungrier than the others and order something more than fries. Unfortunately, he probably regretted that decision in the morning.

The Dairy is known for its ice cream. That being said, everything else should be avoided. Everything is deep fried except for the salads, but even those have chicken strips on them that have been cooked in the fryer. French fries, mushrooms, cauliflower, onion rings, and chicken rings are deep-fried sides while burgers, chicken and fishtails are the main dishes. Sometimes there is a special, but not often. Crystal is the only person I know who can eat food from The Dairy every single meal, every single day and not feel like her insides are falling out the next day. She usually grabs a chicken finger here, a fry there, and pecks all day, but all that grease must get to her sometimes. She says it's in her blood now, and if she cuts her finger that her blood will be mixed with the Dairy grease, as it should be. The kitchen houses two large deep fryers on the right, a grill in the center, and a cold room on the left. The cold room is stocked beyond belief with lettuce, tomatoes, raw hamburger, and all the dessert toppings. It's about the size of a cleaning closet, but smells much better. Sometimes two cooks are needed for the busy shifts, and they work side-by-side in a rhythm only they understand. The close quarters make it impossible to switch places, but the rows of tickets on the counter get filled quicker than any fast-food restaurant in town. If Crystal is working alone, she is the only one in the kitchen and must hide her magic wand. The speed at which she cooks, remembers orders and multi-tasks is

astonishing. I yell into the back that I'm leaving. Crystal waves her spatula. I pick up my paycheck and head out into the chilly December air. I just may go down to the river for a bit. Dairy. She didn't have a lot of time, but wanted me to include part of the menu.