

## Automat

How wonderful they were, each filled with something different, vegetables, potatoes, meats, desserts. My father took me once to Horn and Hardart's, though he hated the city on a Saturday, New York having had its way with him all week. He gave me quarters for my meal, showed me how to take the baked beans out before the small door closed; everything I wanted could be had with a pocket full of coins. Sometimes he would stop before he caught the evening train and bring us home the cake I was smitten with, its raisins plump and the white icing. The box from H&H said "*less work for Mother,*" implying that the man who brought it home was kind, relieving her from the drudgery of sweets. Indeed, my own mother's work was never done, polishing floors with Kleer each week, inspecting beds, hanging loads of laundry on the line to dry. But she never baked, preferring cookies bought at A&P, Oreos and Lorna Doones and Social Teas. Not that it matters much; she's gone and so is he.

It is widow weather now; December, unrelenting rain. In middle age I've bought a cloche like the woman in Hopper's *Automat*, who sits among the small warrens of food, no waitress asking, "Will that be all?" How sad to be alone in a place where everything depends on how much change is in your purse. Evening falls; I am afraid I have become that girl, wearing loneliness just like a coat, ridiculous in my rained-on hat. Did she, like me, have lovers who admired her white skin once, sprawled across a red settee, in light, generous and warm? Does she remember all of them as I do, some who fed me, some who took the best cut; and one especially, who stayed till dawn a time or two, and the way he smelled after hunting in the fall. Have I become her? Lingering long after all the customers have gone, filling days with recollections; and nights, rinsing stockings in the sink, drying out a battered hat, missing dreams that have taken the train west, leaving in their place mile after mile of black sleep.

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