

The Stoker of Disdain

He lifts a shovelful from the conveyor belt and throws it into the oven. Same as the shovelful before, same as the shovelful will be after. He tries to avoid getting any on the floor. There, it is much harder to scoop and the pile on the conveyor belt has time to build up. Regardless, he doesn't over work himself. He has learned the more he does the more they'll give him.

There is no ventilation in here and he is almost naked. His white underwear is tattered and worn to the point of being see through. On his feet are work boots, three sizes too big, that belonged to the worker he replaced. According to her scribbled note on the wall, she was a giantess from New Guinea. He wears nothing else.

He has no gloves and his hands have since formed such large callouses they are thick and scarred.

It was tough at first, this job. Shovelling all the broken dreams and empty promises of the world. The ones from the children are the hardest and burn the hottest, but not even they bother him anymore. And in the end, they all have to go into the oven.

Some days he thinks he is fuelling a macabre machine, its belly lined with hell and brimstone. Other days he thinks he may be doing a service, ridding the world of its never-ending supply of heartache. When he's being really honest, the term day in itself is misleading, as he sees no sunlight or night-time.

The only light he has is that of the fire in the oven.

If ever granted a wish, it would be that he did not know the name and location of every person's broken dream and empty promise he throws into the oven. Occasionally it is somebody he knows-knew-and he feels guilty knowing their secret.

He wonders if there are other ovens like his. One thing is certain, things are busier now than when he started. All the failed careers and business ventures, broken homes and missing children. The adulterers and stealers are in themselves up tenfold.

He met the devil once. He walked in with a woman that called him Fabian. He did not have the red skin and horns on his forehead like others are led to believe, but He was the devil nonetheless. They were talking productivity and when Fabian looked at him directly he found he could not answer His gaze, even if he had wanted to.

The devil did not commend him or even compliment him for doing a good job, and in some ways that hurt as much as the solitude with which he is confined. But he can't complain-he got here honestly enough.

At times he is fortunate and encounters slight lulls. But there are never any breaks.

He periodically thinks back to his old job. It was a long time ago. He not only had breaks, he had coffee breaks. His coffee would have so little milk that people not knowing him would take it for black. On some of these days he even had ginger snap cookies that were delicious. When he starts to reminisce he shoves fast to get the memory of the coffee breaks out of his mind. For here, there is no ginger snap cookies, no coffee, and no breaks.

There is only the oven.

He bends and takes another scoop.