Over the course of the next few weeks, Lyla had done what she could to keep from biting peoples’ heads off.

No easy feat, mind you, given her chosen line of profession! All day, she dealt with lazy kids who didn’t do their homework and got mad at her for a low grade. Or dealing with *dumb* kids who didn’t understand the intricacies of the State’s requirement of (frankly) *entry-level* English assignments. Then there were the conflicts that arose with parents, or the occasional teacher. Sometimes it felt like the whole school, if not the whole dang Holler, was out to get her.

The obvious answer had been to stop dieting. At least for a while, until she wasn’t going to be watched so closely. The pressures of her life were already mounting enough without the added stress of trying to actively lose weight on top of them. So she had suspended her previous diet plan for a more lax one.

A diet that allowed her to eat what she wanted, but in smaller portions.

But somehow, the parts about her life that made her want to rip her hair out were still present. She had told herself that, once she stopped trying to diet, things would just magically go back to normal for her. But unfortunately, the pressures of her life were far more real than any difficulty that she felt when dieting.

And so, it came to this.

“Bobby Millwood, I don’t know *what* I’m going to do with you.”

Well, she knew what she *wanted* to do with him. All too well. The kid was (to put it bluntly) a little jerk. The kinds of students that had drove Lyla back to the holler in the first place. Acting up in class, playing the fool, and disrupting Lyla’s meticulously planned out schedule for the day just for a few yucks.

Most of her classes had been acting up recently, and there seemed to be almost nothing that she could do about it. Not in this late of a stage in classroom management. It would have been far simpler, if not also more unbearable, to wait for a new batch of students and try again with them than it would have been for her to try and correct the relationship that she had with her students now. She had been so stressed, and she had been so upset with just about everything lately, that the idea of release was the only thing getting her through the day.

So that’s probably where the idea came from initially:

“Make yourself useful, for once, and go get me something from the vending machine.”

“M’sorry?” the little country bumpkin asked in his thick Jethro accent

“If you will do me the *kindness* of going to the vending machine an’ grabbin’ me a *soda*, I will rethink giving you detention, callin’ yer mama, an’ tellin’ her that you’re on the shit list *again*.”

The whole classroom went “ooh”, their brains overloaded with stimulation at the utterance of a bad word from Ms. Blackwell *and* her dragging Bobby Millwood through the mud a little. Threatening to call a kid’s mom? That was *low*!

“What, uh… what kind d’ju want?”

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“You told him to go get you a soda?”

“Mm-hm.” Lyla nodded with a mouth full of homemade chicken parm, “An’ he did it too! Then he sat back down and didn’t cause no fuss for the rest of the class.”

Lyla sawed a little more chicken breast off and popped it eagerly in her mouth. Such a display of power had given her plenty of reason to celebrate, even if it *did* sound a little silly when someone like Granny Barb put it into words.

“Well good for you, Lyla Bean!” the old woman tittered and bounced jovially, “S’about time those kids stop gettin’ to walk all over y’all teachers like they do—ooh, these kids today lemme tell you…”

Despite the fact that Granny Barb hadn’t had to take care of a teenager in the better part of the last ten years, she felt well and fully versed to launch into another one of her tirades on the subject. Lyla was just as happy as a clam to let her do it to. She was sick of kids. First it was the ones in the city, and now come to find out the ones back in the Holler were just as rotten as the other ones! As a teacher, she knew that she would have to deal with some troublemakers from time to time, but this whole past semester had gotten her to really question her future in this career.

Sure, the first five months had been great! But five months with a bad batch of kids had been more than enough to make her want to pull teeth…

Something had to give.

And it sure as heck wasn’t going to be her paycheck.

“Settle down, honey!” Granny Barb pat her granddaughter on the back, “There’s plenty, it ain’t goin’ nowhere!”

Lyla couldn’t have agreed less with the sentiment. While she was glad that she had gotten to use what little bit of power that her position in school allowed, the fact that she’d gone and done it had left her a little shaky. If that little brat went to his parents or worse, the principal, about what had happened in class today, her goose would be cooked before she even knew what hit her! Even the *slightest* provocation would get her square back in that chair on the other end of her boss’s desk, and that was something that she knew that she couldn’t risk! Food was what she needed right now. Something that tasted good to help distract her from everything that had occurred.

It helped to take the edge off.

“Well, I take it that this little celebration means that the diet’s off.” Granny Barb joked, “At least for tonight.”

“At least for tonight.” Lyla tried to remain (and look) confident as she scarfed down a heaping helping of mashed potatoes, “I appreciate the support, Granny Barb.”

Lyla wouldn’t leave the dinner table until well past eight ‘o’ clock. For the first time in weeks there wouldn’t be any leftovers for her grandmother to refrigerate as Lyla waddled belly-first down the hall, and into her bedroom.

Unfastening her khakis, Lyla’s belly poured free of the confines that the flaps on her pants had set. Literally bursting through the clasp on her khakis (she’d get Granny Barb to fix that later!) her creamy white gut was stuffed full of so much food that she could hardly contain it all!

Gurgling and groaning, Lyla’s stomach was struggling to process the sheer amount of food that she had put away; and all in the name of celebrating her shift into a new, (hopefully!) less-stressful chapter of teaching!

Plopping down belly-first on the bed, she passed out into a well-earned and disastrously wrought food coma. Her head had hardly hit the pillow before she was dreaming of things to come—her sense of immediate gratification filling her mind with a full wallet and a full belly…

Life was going to be *oh so very good…*

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Luckily for Lyla, none of her students went to the principal about her swearing at Bobby that day in class. Or for ordering him to exit the classroom and to use his own money to buy his way out of detention. It seemed like such a trivial thing after this long had passed and nothing had come of it. Lyla had sworn that she would never do something like that again—that she needed to be careful if she really wanted to keep her job.

Parents and education experts were so sensitive as to how their children were cared for these days, and even the slightest slip of authority could have meant that her head would be on the proverbial pike! The last thing that she needed was to have *another* black mark on her record that pertained to relationships with her students.

But at the same time…

“I tell you what, Billy Rae, if you go get me one’a them honey buns from the vending machine, I *might* forgive you.”

It acted as a surprisingly effective way of classroom management.

The kids didn’t enjoy being called out when they did something bad. Who could blame them? Lyla certainly hadn’t done a good job doing that sort of thing to begin with. This offered a fun little way to offer a softer side *and* keep them out of trouble.

Or at least, from facing the consequences of their actions.

And hey, Lyla got a honey bun almost every time!

It wasn’t exactly the smartest way to run a classroom, but Lyla would admit that she had never felt less stressed than when her kids were more or less well-behaved. And the best way to do that was to get a good laugh out of them. Sending someone on “snack patrol” was the best way to single someone out without making them feel the need to act out. For about a month, edging into March, this little classroom plan had gone off without a hitch. She could kick her feet up, relax, and feel good about how she was in control of the classroom again…

And again, Lyla could indulge herself in a little snack—at least once a period now!

Soon, with the sweet release of a sugar high that she could cling to until lunch time, Lyla’s attitude evened out. And as the kids got more and more used to it, nobody seemed to think twice about it. Certainly not Lyla, who had grown to rather like being able to boss her students around like this. Holding their behavior over their head, with a *direct* phone line to their respective parents had a certain amount of authority to it. Going over the head of the principal and doing what she saw fit to ensure that her classrooms would be tightly managed, and that she would be suitably rewarded for all of the hard work that she put in as a teacher for the public school’s sector…

And that, unfortunately, proved to be Lyla’s undoing.

Because while kids were talking about the teacher who let them choose between detention and going to the vending machine, other teachers were listening. And the way that kids talked with one another, news carried around the school like wildfire.

Granted, most of it was founded in exaggeration, but at least a little bit of it was the truth. The fact that Lyla had her students exit the classroom and get her food and drink was evidence enough, but it would hardly stop at that. With the way that things naturally evolved through rumors, Lyla was very quickly being made out to be running a cartel from her classroom!

*Ms. Blackwell said I didn’t have detention if I bought her a honey bun…*

*Ms. Blackwell didn’t call my mom, but only because I got her a Coke from the vending machine…*

Pretty soon, it was relayed to the Principal that Lyla Blackwell was letting kids *buy* their way out of detention. And that was about one of the worst things that a principal could hear about an educator in their faculty. The fable that was Lyla’s classroom management style had gone so far out of control that nobody save the teacher herself knew what was true anymore!

And for the second time in one semester, Lyla found herself on the other side of the principal’s desk. In his office. Crammed into that stupid little chair. But this time, she was getting torn into.

*How could you let students buy their way out of disciplinary action?*

*I hear that you’re letting them substitute snacks from the vending machine for homework!*

*Are you aware that the students have started calling you Ms. Black Hole, Ms. Blackwell?*

*In what world do you think that this is proper conduct for a teacher to behave?!*

And even after Lyla had cleared up some of the misgivings that had blown up through the grapevine and plain ol’ exaggeration, her boss was still pretty livid.

“Ms. Blackwell, you need to shape up.” He had told her definitely, “Or we’re going to have a *serious* discussion as to whether or not we’ll be renewing your contract next year.”

And so, Lyla quickly put a stop to this new agreement that she’d had with her classes. There were to be no more trips to the vending machine in order to get out of trouble. There was to be no more acting up! They were simply to just do as they were told, finish out the semester, and keep their heads down; all with a silent addendum that it would be the one thing that kept her butt out of the fryer.

But as soon as the class began to erupt again, literally as soon as they had fallen out of her control, and Lyla started to yell at them, she knew that her career as a teacher was over.

Her contract would not be renewed for another semester at Daniel Morgan High School, due in part to low grades and reports of terrible classroom management, as per her observatory visit.

Lyla Blackwell was, once again, out of a job.

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The Summer was unbearably slow—and considering that this was the *second* Summer that she’d been fired from her job, that was really saying something.

“You know, I’m glad that they fired me.”

Lyla huffed as she brought another forkful of cheesecake to her lips. The flaky, gooey goodness had barely tickled her tongue before she had swooped down for another bite. Her wild brown hair bobbed in time with her chest and upper arms as she gestured in a manic mood.

“I was gettin’ real sick of headin’ into work all day, gradin’ papers and tellin’ kids what to do.”

Another bite, followed by a big swig of coffee with extra cream and sugar.

“You know, I don’t think I’m cut out to work in a public school, Granny Barb.” She said definitively, “Maybe I should look into teaching at some kinda private school—where the kids *gotta* behave.”

Granny Barb was happy to help her granddaughter feel better in the best way that she knew how. By keeping the fridge stocked and the oven on warm, she had been able to ensure that Lyla had plenty of food to keep herself occupied with. Given the precarious state that she found herself in, it was the least that a loving grandmother could do. All she wanted was for Lyla to be happy, after all—and if she couldn’t wrangle up a man or a teaching position where the kids weren’t awful, the least that she could do was to make sure that there was plenty to eat while she was at home.

Predictably, Lyla’s diet was the least of her concerns, now that she was out of a job.

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“URRRAAAP”

“Phew-we cuz!” Cousin Faith roared with laughter, “And here I thought that you were startin’ to go soft on me!”

Lyla’s afternoons were free. Her mornings were free. And so were her evenings. And somehow all of them had slowly begun to revolve around food.

Granny Barb would wake her up early for a feel better breakfast. Then she would go take a nap. Then lunch time would rear its ugly head, and she’d get up and stuff herself some more. More often than not, she just wound up laying around the house until she fell asleep on the couch, but occasionally she would go out and try to socialize.

More often than not, it’d be with Cousin Faith. Someone who, despite her trim physique, was *surprisingly* focused on food. At least, where Lyla was concerned.

“Oh yeah cuz, I can tell that diet ain’t the least’a your concerns no more!”

One of Faith’s long-fingered hands ventured daringly towards the squishy apron of chub that rolled out from underneath Lyla’s t-shirt. The thin, tiny thing barely stood a chance against the spectacular growth that her breasts alone had experienced. Two thick, meaty rolls of freckled white belly rolled out from underneath the hem while what remained inside pressed *tight* against the fabric.

Extending a pointer finger, Cousin Faith sunk a digit deep into her cousin’s gut, eliciting a tumultuous burp from her sad, stuffed cousin.

“Hey!” she managed with a slow, heavy swat at her hand, “You… *hff…* you cut that out!”

It was literally the most that she could manage.

All of this laying around, wallowing in her own misery over being fired had to take its toll somehow. And with someone like Granny Barb in the kitchen, pulling the purse strings and doing everything that she could to make sure that Lyla wasn’t *too* terribly depressed over what had happened, was it any wonder that she had dove head-first into her greatest source of comfort?

Lyla had never had much of an eating problem before she moved to the Holler. Heck, she’d never had much of an eating problem before she’d started getting fat. Sure she was a little lazy and didn’t eat as well as she should have, but who among those gals in the South were any better?

But once she had found herself stuck at home with nothing else to do and a hole in her heart to fill, and in a stark contrast to trying to curb her the weight that had cropped up since she’d come back home, all Lyla had been able to do since she’d been laid off *was* eat!

“God… d’you think you could crank that A/C a little higher?” Lyla whimpered, “M’sweatin’ like a hog here…”

“That ain’t *all* you’re doin’ like a hog…”

The contrast between the two cousins had never been more disparate. Faith, the tall lanky brunette with sharp features from her father’s side of the family, while Lyla remained the shorter, straight-haired one with round features; seemingly destined to grow round and out until she resembled a good number of the rest of their family.

Crammed into her nightlies and just barely decent for company coming over, she must have painted quite the picture.

“You want me to go grab you an ice cream sandwich from the fridge, hun?” Faith offered helpfully, “I think y’all still got a few left in the box.”

“Uh-huh.” Lyla nodded weakly, “Bring ‘em here.”

Faith practically jumped off the A/C panel as she headed towards the kitchen, pulling open the freezer door so fast that she made the whole thing rock against the linoleum. She grabbed not one, not two, but *three* ice cream sandwiches from the freezer drawer, closed the door, and returned to the living room.

“Snack break!” she cried out with a wide smile on her face, “Just what the doctor ordered!”

Faith tossed her corpulent cousin one of the bars, leaving two on the coffee table. She had no intention of eating them herself. She was *sure* that Lyla would ask for another helping, one way or another.

“Thanks, Faith.” Lyla frowned as she unwrapped her (first) ice cream sandwich, “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

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Granny Barb did her best to make sure that Lyla didn’t feel too down in the dumps over what had happened at the school.

For years, whenever anyone in her care had been even mildly upset, she would cook all of their favorite meals and convinced them to sit down and ate until they felt better. It was just the way that things were done in the South. Food wasn’t just a way to live, it was a way of *life*. And the best way to feel better about something was to sit down at the dinner table.

Of course, that was because *most* of the time, people talked out their problems at the dinner table. Even if they indulged themselves in a little comfort food, there was still a sense of “I’ve got to get this off of my chest” that was prevalent in the idea of getting someone to calm down and eat their favorite foods. A sort of acknowledgement that something was wrong and that they needed to discuss it.

In the South, and most particularly with Granny Barb, the subtext was often thrown out the window.

“You feelin’ better yet, Lyla Bean?” the older woman asked with a touch of concern in her voice, “Want me to go get you some more sweet tea?”

Lyla burped into the back of her hand as she struggled to lean forward. Her distended stomach pressed hard against the edge of the table, stuffed taut with what must have been thousands of Southern fried calories to help coax her stomach outwards.

She felt like a blimp. All day, eating. It was the only thing that she could do to pass the time anymore! Now that she didn’t have a job and all of her friends were still employed, either at the school or other parts of the Holler, the only thing that she could do to make those hours tick by was eat. And it made her feel good. In control. The last thing that she needed was to feel like there was something *else* she couldn’t manage in this stupid life.

No job, no boyfriend, no accredited experience with a school that hadn’t lead to termination.

“Yeah, Granny.”

She huffed and puffed, moist to the touch as she leaned in over the dinner table. Her fat arms jiggled ever so slightly as she lowered one hand to grab a biscuit from the basket. She dipped it in the small moat of gravy and took a big eager bite out of it.

The chair creaked beneath her. Stupid old thing had probably seated people who were *hundreds* of pounds heavier than her, but of course it had to give Lyla lip. She knew that she was going overboard with all of the eating, and the last thing that she needed was to hear some weak protests from a stupid chair.

“Ughhh…”

No matter how much she ate, Lyla never managed to feel any better about everything that had happened. Sure, there was the high of getting to eat her favorite foods day in and day out, of not having to worry about getting a job until the Summer was up, and getting to sleep in late. Her Granny spoiled her in that regard and plenty of others. But things just weren’t getting any…

*“UURRAAAAP”*

Okay, maybe they were a *little* better.

“Phew! That was a big one!” Granny Barb laughed as she returned with the glass pitcher of sweet tea, “Makin’ some room there, are ya?”

“I guess so.”

Lyla laid her palms flat against her fat belly. Soft to the touch, aside from its rock-hard foundation of food underneath, Lyla’s stomach was getting bigger by the day. Not to mention her thighs or hips or ass. She knew that all this layin’ around wasn’t going to be good for her in the long run. But after everything that she had been through in the past year, dealing with her responsibilities as a teacher and all that, wasn’t she at least a *little* entitled to a break?

*Still…*

She ran her hands up and down her belly, frowning down at the sagging apron of flesh that hung heavily over the waistband of her pajama bottoms. The pliable pudge gave way to her very touch, her fingertips sinking into the pampered fat that had come to rest around her middle as she lifted it—with some effort—from the base of her chair.

“I’m gonna find a job, Granny Barb.” Lyla said out of the blue, just as her grandmother managed to top off her glass of tea, “I promise, I’m not just gon’ lay around here.”

“I know you will, Lyla Bean.”

The older woman pat her granddaughter’s meaty shoulder with one hand.

“But I hope you don’t think there’s any rush—I don’t mind havin’ you around the house, and Lord knows that you could use a break.”

Lyla settled a little bit at that. Sinking slightly into her chair as a breath of low, contemplative air sounded from deep inside of her. Without thinking too terribly hard about it, she made another grunting reach for the mashed potatoes. A mouthful was about what she needed right about now.

“Still…” she managed through two cheeks full of spud, “I appreciate all that you do for me. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do.”

A thick, wet, grandmotherly kiss on Lyla’s cheek as the old woman retreated back into the kitchen.

“That’s why I make sure that you have *everything* you might want from the kitchen—I know you work hard, and there ain’t no sense in not rewardin’ that.”

Lyla smacked her lips, her expression softening.

*I do work hard, don’t I*?

*I’ll get out of this mess.*

*It’s just gonna take a little time…*