

The Disasters

by

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Every afternoon around 3:00, the regulars squeezed into the Donut Shoppe. The Fabio Brothers took the corner booth. The Skinny Minnies sat at the two-seater along the wall. The Jokers huddled around two tables near the front, and The Disasters crowded around the circular table in the middle. People didn't actually call them by these names; but nevertheless, the names existed.

Tish, one of The Disasters, was the one who got the idea. "This is dumb," she said, staring at the pink sprinkles on her chocolate-covered donut like they were going to sprout legs and crawl away.

She didn't say anything more, so Nora finally jumped in. "Your donut is dumb?" she asked. Nora pushed up her glasses and looked at Dianne who had her hand over her mouth. Laynie picked bits of frosting off her maple donut and glanced at the other women without much interest.

Pudgy elbows rested on The Disaster's table, double chins jiggling with every turn of the head. They met mid-afternoon for their break just like everyone else in the Donut Shoppe, but when these women sat around the table, they sat *around* the table.

"We come here every day on our afternoon break and eat donuts," Tish continued with her arm raised in illustration, showing the group how much fat she could wobble. "We shouldn't be eating donuts."

“I know,” said Laynie, the newest and youngest member of The Disasters. “I’ve gained like five pounds since I started working for Paul.” Laynie was more of an honorary Disaster. She worked with Dianne, but she wasn’t overweight like they were. She wasn’t a Skinny Minnie, but any of the other three would have given their left arm to be her size.

Tish crossed her arms across her stomach and pursed her lips. Nora used the back of her hand to push up her glasses before consuming the last bits of frosting from her fingertips and reaching for a napkin from the holder in the middle of the round table.

“You know,” Tish said leaning forward, “some people walk on their afternoon breaks.”

“Oh! We could do that,” said Laynie, perking up a bit. “Do you want to do that tomorrow, Dianne? We could walk to the pharmacy and get Tish. Nora, you’d have to drive over, but we could all go walking.”

It was Tish’s idea, but now she looked as uncertain as a mouse eyeballing the cheese in a trap. “What have we got to lose,” she finally said, “besides this?” She jiggled her arm fat again.

The next day, Dianne and Laynie walked to the pharmacy to get Tish, but Tish was too busy to take an afternoon break, so they went on to find Nora. Nora was eating a cream-filled maple in the Donut Shoppe.

“Good afternoon,” she said around a mouthful of sugary delight.

“Are we walking today?” asked Laynie.

“Oh, I forgot,” she said. “How about tomorrow? My break’s almost over.”

“It was a nice walk over from the insurance office,” said Dianne. “I think I’ve earned my donut for the day.” Laynie’s mouth dropped open and her chin may have quivered a little as she watched Dianne buy and then devour not one, but two, glazed donuts before getting ready to walk back.

The next few days were much the same. The three women usually had an excuse for Laynie as to why today wasn't any good for walking, maybe tomorrow. There were always good reasons to indulge in an afternoon treat or two. Even Tish, who came up with the idea, made regular excuses.

One day, Dianne walked into the Donut Shoppe without Laynie.

"Did Laynie finally give up on us?" asked Nora.

"We don't know," said Dianne with real concern. "She didn't show up to work today, and we haven't heard anything from her. Paul said he would stop by her house, but we were so busy this morning. Then he didn't come back after lunch. I just locked up for a bit to come over here. I have my phone in my pocket in case anybody needs to reach me."

"I hope she's OK," said Tish, pursing her lips.

The three women sat in silence for a moment until Dianne's ringtone sliced through the air like a butter knife cutting through a raspberry-filled donut.

"Hi, Paul. Is everything OK?" she answered. "Oh, no!" Her free hand shot to her mouth and then moved to her cheek. "That poor girl. Oh, that poor girl." She ended the call with a shake of her head, letting the others know that whatever had happened was bad.

Nora pushed up her glasses and laid a gentle hand on Dianne's shoulder. "What is it?"

"Laynie took some pills," she said in a low voice, her eyes wet with the bewilderment of it. "She's OK, but it looks like she tried to kill herself." She whispered this last part when she realized the place had gone quiet. Even the Jokers appeared serious today.

"Oh, no," Tish said with pursed lips. Nora pushed up her glasses. The ladies were so upset; they didn't even finish their donuts.

Later that night, the large women crowded into a tiny hospital room, one on each of the three sides of Laynie's bed. Kandi, the nurse on duty, stopped in to check on Laynie but couldn't quite reach her patient. She told the ladies to keep the visit short, and she'd be back in a few minutes.

Laynie was awake, but she wouldn't talk. She lay on her side facing Tish. "What happened?" Tish asked. "Laynie, what happened?"

"Must be something bad," said Nora from the other side of the bed.

"Oh, Laynie," said Dianne. "Why?"

"Because," came her shaky, high-pitched voice. "I hate me." Laynie rolled to her back and opened her eyes. She blinked a few times, and the tears spilled from the corners of her eyes. "I'm so fat," she wailed. The three women looked as shocked as the old woman who swallowed a fly.

"Honey, you're not fat," said Dianne. "We're fat. *I'm* fat, but you're not. You're beautiful."

This made Laynie cry even more. "You are you. It's just the way you are, but I hate me! I hate the way I look!" The nurse, who was thin as a toothpick, entered the room and slithered past Tish to try and calm her patient.

"God loves you just the way you are," Tish said in a soft voice as she left Laynie's side.

The ladies waddled out of the tiny room and wandered down the hall to a large window with a view of the back lawn of the hospital.

"This feels backwards," Tish said.

"We're looking at the back side of the hospital," Nora said.

“No, I mean her in there and us out here.” Tish turned and smothered the window ledge with her backside.

“You think we should attempt what she did?” asked Dianne.

“No, it’s just backwards. She’s the skinny one and she hates how she looks?”

“I don’t get it,” Dianne said with a sigh, finger on her chin.

Tish pursed her lips. “You know,” she began. “I’m big and fat, and it’s not OK, but I accept it. I mean, sure, I’d like to lose weight and feel better and maybe not have my ankles hurt so much, but I’ll never be skinny.”

“You never know,” said Dianne. “People lose hundreds of pounds.”

“And then they have to have their skin cut off,” said Nora. “I’m with Tish. I’m big and fat and that’s the way it is.” She pushed her glasses up and crossed her arms over her stomach.

“But what about her?” asked Tish. “We looked at her and thought it would be the greatest thing in the world to look that way, but she hates the way she looks. How can that be?”

“Do you hate the way you look so much that you want to die?” asked Dianne. Eyes widened. Nora pushed up her glasses. Tish pursed her lips. Dianne put her hand across her mouth, then moved it to her cheek and continued, “We think people judge us by the way we look, and maybe they do, but we shouldn’t judge ourselves based on how we look on the outside.”

“That’s what Laynie did,” said Tish. “Isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” said Dianne, “but that’s what we did, too. We looked at her and thought she was better off than us because she wasn’t so big.”

“Maybe we all need to stop judging our insides by other people’s outside,” said Tish.

“Maybe we do,” said Dianne.

“You know they call us ‘The Disasters’ at the Donut Shoppe,” said Tish.

“I know,” Dianne replied, “and we have names for them. All we see is people’s outsides.”

“They shouldn’t call us that,” said Nora.

“It don’t mean nothing. It’s not between me and them, anyway; it’s between me and Him,” said Dianne.

“I’ve heard that before,” said Tish.

“God and I know the truth. That’s what really matters,” said Dianne.

“So, what do we do now? Where do we go from here?” said Nora.

“I don’t know about you two, but I’m going back to work tomorrow. Then, I’m going to the Donut Shoppe for my break.”

“You’re going to start eating donuts again?” asked Tish.

“Maybe. Or maybe I’ll just enjoy the atmosphere.”

“With ‘The Disasters’?” added Nora.

“No. With my friends,” said Dianne.