

I never made the conscious decision to stop being a person. It faded. The contents of a dream. An apron wove itself around my waist. Brightly colored polyester shirts found me no matter what house I woke up in, and buttoned in my stomach. My legs always indigo jeaned. My posture leaned. My face polite smile. My voice a melon left too long on the counter. *Good evening, my name is Adam. How can I help you? Have you been here before? Is this your first time? Welcome. Are you familiar with our menu? Can I start you off with some drinks? Let me top that off for you. Welcome back. Haven't seen you in a while, It must be a Tuesday night if you're here. We ought to charge you rent for this table.*

There is no such thing as a bad night if you don't have any good nights to compare it to. Forty dollars for six hours of rolling silverware and running other servers' food. Three hundred dollars for a three hour party of twelve with three hyperactive kids, and one woman angry about the added twenty percent gratuity. Another server drops a full tray of food for your table. Your mother stops by unexpectedly, sits in your section and complains to your coworkers how it's the only way she ever gets to see you. Every night is every night when every night is every night.

I have spent so much of my life in this town, I smell like clam chowder and cranberry dust. I taste like flip flops and desolate winters. I am so ready to get off Cape Cod that I have begun feeding parts of myself to seagulls, whether they're headed north, south, or into the ocean.

The only host that's taller than me is a 6'5" Jehovah's Witness named Alaister, who hasn't figured out if I'm flirting with him or condescending to him. As soon as I figure out which I'm doing, I'm going to let him know.

I've been waiting tables or making salads or hosting or busing tables or making schedules or tending bar or washing dishes or entering sales figures into computers for so long, it's like I never managed a music store, or ran a liquor store, or worked tech in a theater. I still work weekends selling fudge at a renaissance faire, but I'm not supposed to talk about it at work, so it's all I think about.

Last week I decided that for my twenty-second birthday, I'm quitting everything. I'm going to smoke my voice rough, Throw my bent smile away, and hope it doesn't boomerang. I'm going to hang my apron around someone else's neck and drive the drive out of here. Somewhere where there's a tourist economy, but it isn't seasonal. Somewhere I'll never run into a high school teacher or friend's mother who tells me I'm sure to be the next big thing Once I Get Out Of Here. How they can't wait to see me on Saturday Night Live or in a movie.

"Did you see that Blair Witch Project movie?" asked Mrs. Keane who gave me a C+ in English, and shouted the word *potential* every time she saw my parents across a crowded bar. So, three times a week. "That's what you're going to do. Something nobody sees coming, and everybody talks about. Something cutting edge and eternal." She waited tables, too. Weekends in the winter, six nights a week in the summer. That's how teachers on Cape Cod afford to eat and split a two-family house with an estranged ex-husband, two kids, and her ex-brother in law.

I afford to eat by working in restaurants with decent employee discounts, and being incredibly kind to anyone who I see be incredibly kind. I was working in the creatively named Wine Store when the proprietor of Kookaburra Canyon came into the store.

"This is a nice place." Julie said. Smile like a name tag. "You guys need a sign or

something, though. I almost walked right by.”

“My boss says you have to be in this plaza for a year before they give you room for a sign.” I said. “When I point out that Kookaburra Canyon had a sign before they started building their location across the parking lot, he just shrugs.”

“This isn’t your store?” Still smiling.

I wasn’t even legally allowed to buy anything when I started working here six months ago. “No. My mom’s banging the owner.” This is a lie. She is banging the owner’s golfing buddy. Which is fine, as long as she stays with him, I can pretend I’m living on my own in a nice condo, and not paying my mom rent to, essentially, still live at home.

“My name is Julie.” She puts her hand out. I shake it, and mirror her smile. “I’m the proprietor of Kookaburra Canyon,” I know that. You already know that. But she wants to make sure that I know that. “We have a tasting for our incoming staff tomorrow, and our wine distributor hosed us. We were hoping we could buy a bunch of bottles from you, if you have them in stock.”

She slides me a list. “We have a few of these. Let me call the owner. He has another store across town, and probably has the rest of these there.”

“Karen. It’s Adam. Is George there? Could you? Yea. Yea. It’s important. Yea. That’s. Yea. I wouldn’t call if it wasn’t. No. Now. Thanks.” I smile at Julie. “Hey, George. Yea. Yea. The proprietor of Kookaburra Canyon is here. You know the new place that’s opening up across the parking lot. The one with the big sign out front. Yea. They need to buy some wine for an event they’re having and. Yea. So they’re having an event tomorrow, and they need a bunch of wine. We have some of it here, but I was hoping. Yea. Yea. I have the list here. Want me to read it to you? Ok.” Shirazes and white zinfandels and pinot grigios cross the town on the cheapest phone connection money can buy. The cordless phone statics. I repeat myself several times. I smile at Julie. Julie smiles back. “I have the rest of the brands they need here. Yea. Yea. What sort of discount can I give them? Discount. Well, they’re. Excuse me, Julie.” I walk into the walk-in cooler. Even though I am in the company mandated short sleeve shirts with our stupid logo over the heart. “George. If we cut them some sort of deal, they can send customers our way. I know we’re already doing them a favor. Just. Yea. But they’re. I’m not saying at cost. Twenty percent off. Or fifteen. It’s good business. It’s. They open in a week. Not even ten percent? Why not? Why not? Ok. Yea. Fine. I understand.” I hang up the phone and walk back behind the counter. “Are you guys still hiring?”

Julie’s eyes pry wider. Her smile finds a new angle. “Why?”

“My boss told me he would fire me if I gave you a discount, but I hate this job.”

For the first time, Julie’s smile decreases ever so slightly. “Oh, don’t lose your job over it. It’s fine. We can afford to pay full price.”

“But it’s a much better story if I get fired for giving you a discount than if I just quit after charging you full price.”

Except I don’t get fired. I get reprimanded. And I tell them I’m leaving in two weeks. And they don’t believe me. And when I don’t show up on the fifteenth day, the owner sends his sister, Sharon, over. His sister who flasks vodka behind the counter, and whose son screams Megadeth at three different karaoke nights in town, and who I’ve twice walked in on while he was giving head in a men’s room I’m ashamed to even pee in. “WHERE WERE YOU?” She asks, when clearly I was in the restaurant that she is now in. “I had to stay an extra hour and close BY MYSELF. You’re so. So inconsiderate.

I'm going to tell your mother." Which she will. And whatever.

"I told you I was leaving. I even wrote it on the calendar."

"Well, George didn't hire anybody new, so you have to stay until he does. You'd better be there tomorrow."

"I won't be." I say. "I don't work there anymore. I'm sorry."

Julie, smiling all the while, puts her arms around Sharon. "Can I buy you a drink?" and walks her away from me.

I am still standing there a week later, a month later, six months later. I am always still standing there. Feeling bad for Sharon for being mad at me instead of her brother. I am always apologizing to her for her alcoholism. For her dependence on her brother's business. One of the many fronts for however he really makes his money. It isn't the liquor store or the wine shop. It isn't the realty business that only rents condos to his golfing buddies and their mistresses. I assume it's drugs. I don't know. I'll never know.

Men like him don't own businesses to make money. They own businesses to get into politics. They underpay their employees so they can buy boats. They hire their sisters and the children of people who owe them favors. If the kid is shut up enough. If he does not question or have aspirations, he can maybe caddy a business golf. He can manage a storefront with no customers. If he can accept compliments instead of paychecks, and take a sub-living wage under the table, he can bring some hot barely legal girlfriend along to see the boat, as long as he also washes it once a week. If he is told He Will Be Someone long enough, he'll stop noticing how he isn't yet seen as human.

Julie buys me a drink, too. After my shift is over. We laugh about my first week. The hostile woman with the thick Southie accent yelling at me about how I was cheating her out of her money because our Caesar salads are just lettuce. "If I'm paying \$4.99 for this little fucken plate, I expect some tomatoes. Some cucumbers. Some onions. And some carrots. You hear me? I wasn't born yesterday. I know what's in a salad." We smirk about how the first day I worked for Kookaburra Canyon I had to take a menu test that the rest of the incoming staff had two weeks to prepare for. How I had latched on to the phrase "smothered in honey mustard", which was used to describe one chicken dish, but which I had used nine times, three times for chicken dishes, and six times for steaks because I knew SOMETHING was smothered in honey mustard, and I didn't want to leave it off any dish that might possibly be the correct one. When we talk about Sharon, Julie mentions wanting to smother Her in honey mustard. And for once, she isn't smiling when she says it.

Tuesday nights, Joe manages the front of the house. Which means classic rock instead of modern pop. A little Aerosmith with your cheese fries. A dollop of Van Halen on your baked potato. It's stupid how happy this minute detail makes me. It usually keeps me smiling until about 9:45 when, without fail, Wings's "Band On The Run" comes on. A song I thought I didn't much care for until I started working here. Now I hate it. Even though it means we're fifteen minutes from closing, I know that three hours of that fifteen minutes will be Paul McCartney screeching at me. And that three minutes after it starts The Jesus Ladies will come in, order two coffees, and one Aussietizer Sampler, and sit in my section for an hour while I run back and forth,

balancing each of the servers' accounts for the night, while making sure their coffee is topped off. They will tip me two dollars and one Christian trading card. I have two Judases, three Moseses, a Mary, a Paul, and more Holy Ghosts than you can shake a t-shaped stick at. Joe always lets me stay late and drink for free to make up for it.

Before he went back to Iowa, Alaistar told me he thought the ladies were cute. "Not in a sexy way," which I knew because he was naked in my bed, covered in sweat, "but, you know, adorable. I like that they're trying to save your soul with trading cards."

Julie hasn't met them, but is sure they're horrible. I should start sleeping with her. Once the chlamydia she picked up from her cheating ex-husband clears up. I haven't told her that I'm pretty sure he got it from Ellen, the salad lady. Ellen and I went to middle school together, and I know the looks she gives to Julie's husband. And I have a pretty good idea why she's always scratching at her pants. I'm pretty sure Julie knows about Ellen anyway. They're never scheduled at the same time anymore.

Erica tells me that she's the one who gave Paul (Julie's husband) chlamydia. But last week Erica told me she hadn't been laid in months. And a few days ago she had to request a night off from work because she was auditioning for Law & Order. In Rhode Island, somehow. And I saw her at Blockbuster that night, and she started crying, telling me how the director told her she had lesbian hair, but tried to sleep with her, anyway. And could she come stay at my house because she was pretty sure that another one of our coworkers was stalking her. I told her I had to drive up to Provincetown to pick up fudge for my weekend job, and she offered to give me a blowjob on the way up, if I'd just keep her company. Does no one in this industry have any morals? Standards? How does a woman who lost an imaginary job because she has "lesbian hair" not realize that I'm not just driving up to Provincetown to pick up fudge?

"I'm so tired of having to listen to all that gay shit." Scott says, after some harmless, closeted, retail manager at karaoke had the audacity to sing Memory from Cats. "You should get up there and sing some fucken Guns N Roses. Blast these wussies back to Provincetown."

I've known Scott since third grade. I was a wussy until graduation, at which point, I was still here, still willing to talk to him, and therefore an acceptable human being. Humanish being.

I sing Radiohead's Creep, which manages to be "killer", even though it involves me going completely falsetto. I guess Axl Rose was also mostly falsetto. Manly falsetto. Testosterone head voice. The straight screech of primal passion, and not the meek art of Broadway.

Scott is one of the only guys I hang out with that I can't imagine ever having any sort of sex with. I'd like to think he's never naked. That all of his hostility is from the frustration of never being able to get his too tight, too faded denim off. I'd like to think he's going to rot here, a virgin on Cape Cod, pickled in Coors Light.

My confessions aren't cracked knuckles, picked nose, gender preference, where the bodies are buried. I burn all the maps to other peoples' tragedies. I smile. I nod my head like I'm supposed to. All of my stories are cold plates of appetizers for a table of friends. Smothered in honey mustard.

It's ten past Band On The Run O'Clock when the last table of the night comes in. Erica is closing, so it should be her table. But this week she thinks she might be pregnant, and I agree to take them.

Two people sitting at a table for six has me appropriately nervous as I approach the table. A twenty-something marionette with the sort of lipstick and eyeshadow designed to scare away predators waves me away from the table as I approach. She is on her cell phone, while the guy with the popped collar and the top button of his shirt casually unbuttoned, stares at the menu.

I make eye contact with Erica, who shrugs apologetically. But she doesn't mean it.

I clear off Erica's last table, bringing everything to the dishwashers before returning to Table Seven. She attempts to wave me away again. "I'm sorry." I say, though I don't mean it, either. "But we close in about five minutes. If you want to order something, I have to put in your order now or it won't get made."

"What?" The Phantasmal poison frog asks.

"The kitchen is about to close. I'm sorry. Do you know what you'd like to order, so I can put it in for you?"

"We. Just. Got here." she says.

I shrug. "Sorry."

"Fine." She returns to her phone call. "Apparently they're about to close, or something. So you need to get here, like, yesterday, Fanklin. What do you want to eat? Ok. And Tiny? I mean Tony? Fine. Anthony. What does Anthony want? Yea. Yea, fine. And Clarissa. Ok. Yea. Yea. Fine. Should we get an order of cheese fries? Ok. How about shrimp? Shrimp? Like Tony. HA. Sorry. Anthony. A SHRIMP LIKE YOU, YOU HEAR ME ANTHONY? YOU WANT A SHRIMP? Clarissa likes shrimp. You know it. Fine. Fine. No shrimp. Just Tony. Sorry. Anthony. BECAUSE HE'S ENOUGH SHRIMP FOR ALL OF US, I GUESS. Yea. Yea. Ok, well Hitler here wants me to put the order in. Yea, Hitler. He has the goatee and everything."

My smile flickers off my face. Hitler's goatee?

"Ok. Fine. FINE. Let me put the order in before he freaks out some more." She smiles at me, and points at the menu as she gives me the order. "We want ONE clam chowder. Ok? TWO orders of cheese fries. Extra bacon. Extra. Bacon. Ok? Three cheeseburgers. Extra well done. We don't want mad cow disease or anything. Burn them suckers. I'll also have a Caesar salad. Josh, do you want anything?"

"I'll also have a burger, I guess. Medium well."

"Get. It. Well." she says. "He'll have it well done. I'm not kissing any Mad Cow Motherfucker."

"Ok. Four burgers well done, three with cheese. Two orders of cheese fries, extra bacon. One chowder, and one Caesar salad. Would you like anything to drink?"

"WA-TER."

"Sure. And you, sir?" I ask.

"I'll have a ... Budweiser."

"Of course. Can I see your ID?"

"BUS-TED. Josh got BUS-TED. He'll have a Coke. And put a cherry in it."

I go back into the kitchen. Izzy is on grill. Ellen went home, so it looks like I'm making the salad, and getting the soup myself. "Three cheeseburgers and one hamburger walking in. Plus two orders of cheese fries with enough bacon to be considered a hate crime."

Izzy smiles. I smile. We are all smiles here.

"I actually made an order of cheese fries for you and Erica. If you want to take one out now, I'll put in two more, one for them and one for you. But yours will just have regular bacon. Ok?"

"You're a lifesaver, Izzy." I ladle some ranch dressing into a ramekin, pick up the cheese fries and head back to table seven. The rest of the crew has arrived, but I notice that nobody is sitting directly next to the poison frog woman of Barnstable. I put the fries and dressing down, take the rest of the drink order and head back to the kitchen. I've barely got the second glass up to the soda dispenser when Erica comes in. Eyes half her face.

"Table seven wants to see you, like, now." she says, and shakes her head.

I walk back out there.

"What? Is? This?" Poison Frog asks. The left most part of her upper lip sneered to her nose.

"I don't—"

"This clam chowder is gross. It's cold. It tastes disgusting. It's tiny. And there are no clams in it. I'm NOT paying for this."

Hitler Goatee? "That's not— That's Ranch Dressing." I say. "I haven't brought the clam chowder yet."

Anthony, Franklin, and Clarissa start laughing hysterically. Josh intently reads the menu.

"Well. Get. My. Chowder. And also, we need more ranch dressing."

Erica is passing out the drinks. Her eyes still wide.

I walk back into the kitchen, grab the ladle and fill a chowder bowl with enough ranch dressing to drown a frog.