

Shark swimming through tables of salt and pepper shaker people. Watching waves of hands snap in my direction. This polyester uniform is shrinking me. I am fifteen to twenty percent of who I used to be. But some nights, when the right music is playing, I can spray time across the night. In between greeting tables, taking orders, and running food, I ascend into a near divine place, tossing frisbee platters of the most tender filets to the barking seals at Table Forty-One. The party table. The eight top for business meetings. For large families too exhausted to tip if you don't include gratuity on the check. For the record store employees from across the parking lot to come in on Thursdays and boost moods and sales with their appropriate amount of drinking and love of appetizers.

Table Forty One is the literal stuff of nightmares. Every server has them. You somehow didn't notice eighteen people sitting in our section, and they're furious and need food now, but also you have four other tales, and now one of them is slowly ordering desserts, and you can't leave them. Or the salads are piling up in the window, and you don't know where any of the other servers are.

The nightmares of servers are never that there aren't enough customers. That the bills won't be paid because the economy is so awful that no one can afford ten bucks for grilled shrimp on a strip of bread. It's always an unrelenting rush. A hidden table. Abandoned by coworkers. Things that should be financially advantageous but aren't because capitalism doesn't favor the workers, it favors only the business owners and the angriest customers.

Twenty years of non-serving retail hasn't degraded the waiting tables nightmare. Rarely do I dream of comic book store problems, coffeehouse issues, record store conundrums, the angry wasps of every variety that overtook the renaissance faire at the end of every season, angry tourists at the fudge shop. It's always restaurant customers. Always disappointed. Always a tide of them washing over my sleep.

I don't remember a single waking time when any restaurant I worked in felt so busy that I wasn't in control. That the world might disintegrate around me. That my coworkers would reach their limit of not knowing their weekend schedule until Friday night because the scheduling manager was too busy getting fingered in the walk-in refrigerator to figure out who would work which shifts. With usually one exception per staff, every restaurant I ever worked for had a group of servers who looked out for each other, offered each other couches when times were tough, bought drinks they couldn't afford for coworkers who could afford them less, used their limited time-off to babysit other servers' kids, throw ten dollars of money they needed for the server who got stiffed on a large table or who somehow lost their tips from the night. It's a community I've never felt from any other job or hobby.

Jeremy started in October. Like most of the rest of us, he was twenty-tired with a couple years of experience from another corporate restaurant chain. He got along with everyone but didn't hang out with us. I never knew his last name, where he lived, if he dated anyone. I just know he was, at his core, better than most of the people I was working with.

It was a Monday night. And it sucked. I was the head waiter, which meant I was the first one in, I was guaranteed the most tables of the night, and I was cut early so that I could count the figures for every other server, and enter them into the computer.

I had four tables, and none of them had tipped very well. But I had made the most money. Jeremy had put an extra ten in his bag, so I walked out into the dining room to hand him

the extra cash.

Bernard and Jeff were up by the host stand. Bernard, six foot, bordering on thirty, stripper girlfriend, convinced that having a stripper girlfriend made him somehow manlier, slight stutter. Jeff five nothing, two hundred pounds, parents pay his rent at thirty-two. Bernard and Jeff were up at the host stand. The front door was locked. The dining room empty. The closing host, just eighteen, five foot also nothing, so skinny he seems to float, smile like I love you. Patrick. Patrick was laughing at something. Bernard was laughing. Jeff was laughing. Jeremy looked over from the table where he was marrying glass bottles of ketchup which was definitely illegal, but also standard practice in restaurants trying to get by. You pour a near empty bottle of ketchup into another bottle until it's full. Every bottle of ketchup in the restaurant looks full at opening. We were just a couple of years away from red plastic bottles making the whole process seem like faxing or darning socks. Jeremy smiled at the laughing host stand. I smiled.

Bernard was almost always trying to be funny. And Jeff and Patrick were always there to laugh at his jokes. On night, Priscilla, the head host stomped into the kitchen and called out the manager's name. "I was just up at the host stand, and there area bunch of customers, and Bernard comes up and starts dropping F Bombs."

The manager's jaw tightened. "He's dropping F Bombs in front of the customers?"

"And they stink!" Priscilla said.

"What?"

"They stink! Horribly!"

The jaw loosens. "Priscilla. Priscilla. Are you saying that he's ... gassy?"

"He's doing in on purpose. He comes up to talk to me, he smiles, then walks away, and the stench. It's gross!"

"Fine," the manager said. "But that's not what 'F Bombs' are. I thought you were saying that he was up front swearing in front of the customers."

"No." Priscilla waved her hands in front of her face. "He's farting! He's farting near me! And I'm not going to stand for it anymore!"

It was difficult not to laugh at that whole scenario, even though we all agreed Bernard needed to leave Priscilla alone for a while.

I was thinking that gas might have been involved in the Monday night laughter when Bernard dropped a different kind of F Bomb. "You want my D?" Bernard asked, walking toward Patrick.

Patrick laughed. Jeff laughed. Bernard laughed. "Look at him." Bernard said to Jeff. "He sees my fly down, and he wants my massive D. Well you can't have it Faggot."

Jeremy put down the ketchup bottle. I put the bag of cash and paperwork in my apron.

Patrick disappeared behind the host stand. Bernard disappeared. Jeff disappeared. Patrick's laughter disappeared. "Guys, what are you doing?" Jeff had been carrying a broom. Why was Jeff carrying a broom?

Jeremy and I broke into a run.

Patrick was on the floor, pants pulled down around his ankles. Jeff was holding the broom so its handle grazed Patrick's—

“What the fuck are you doing?” Jeremy, who’d found his speech faster than me, asked.

“Relax.” Bernard said. “We’re fucking around. Right, Patrick?”

Bernard picked Patrick up with a single hand. Patrick pulled his pants up. “Yea. Sure. Just messing around.” Smile like a scream.

“No.” Jeremy said. “Just. No. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The manager heard Jeremy and head nodded his way over to the host stand “Sup guys? Something wrong, Jeremy? What’s going on up there?”

I walked back to the office, knowing the manager would make his way in and ask for my recounting of events. But the thing is. The thing was, and still is. I knew the outcome. I knew the impending wrist slap. The insincere written apology. The handshakes. I knew that Patrick and Jeremy would both quit soon, while Bernard and Jeff would still be here getting the best shifts. I knew the manager would ask us all to contribute to birthday presents for Bernard and Jeremy on their respective days. I knew Jeff would end up in management, and Bernard would leave to go work for his father, selling cars. And that they would look back on the night they pulled Patrick’s pants down and laugh. And that I would continue working there past Patrick’s departure, and the night the manager planned a birthday celebration for Jeremy, and Jeremy didn’t show up for that shift or any other one. I would keep buying drinks for Jeff because Jeff bought drinks for me. My horrible family of the apron and order pad.