May I Take Your Order?

Kara Day

Abstract

I am a server, and like any other person, I have stories to tell. This paper is about my experiences serving at three different restaurants and my relationships with my customers. My character struggles to find meaning and respect from her job, and as the story progresses, she gradually loses herself in her dream-like reality.
It’s 11:30pm and my feet are swollen and throbbing. My back and shoulders are aching from carrying heavy trays and standing for hours. My manager walks around with his printout, listing everyone who hasn’t clocked out for break.

“Kara, Moku, Gilbs, and Kehau clock out for break now!” he roars.

“Why we gotta clock out then keep working, huh?” Kehau mumbles while polishing silverware.

“I think it’s a labor thing,” I say. “If we work over six hours without taking a break, DiBs gets audited or something like that.”

“So shitty. I like see them work for free,” she responds.

We aren’t supposed to work on our breaks, but we still do anyways. We want to finish our closing duties and get out, even if that means having to work off the clock.

I’m tired, and my hands are beginning to cramp from polishing silverware. I continue to roll one folk and one knife onto a piece of white linen, stacking it into a bin.

Polish.

Place silverware onto napkin.

Roll.

Stack.

Repeat hundred and thirty-five times or until bin is full.

_Damn. I forgot to clock-in again_, I think.

I clean my section, refilling and organizing the four different kinds of sugar packets on each of my tables in my section.

_I love it when customers’ kids play with the sugar and mix them all up so I can go through and organize everything again—makes my job so-much-easier._

I take a deep breath, and tell myself to calm down.

_It’s just sugar, Kara. No need to get all stressed out._

I refill and wipe down the salt and pepper shakers, wipe away any fingerprints or kiddy-slobber off the windows, and finally sweep under the chairs and tables. Before I head back to the kitchen, a customer—or “guest” as my managers like to say—stops me to ask for some Tabasco. I grab a bottle from the kitchen, walk back to the table and drop it off.
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“Um can I get some ranch too?”

“Sure”, I answer in an up-beat, enthusiastic voice followed by a big smile.

Repeat walk to kitchen and continue back to customer’s table.

“Can I also get a refill of fruit punch with no ice and a lot of lemon slices?”

“Sure, anything else I can get you?” I ask with an even more up-beat, enthusiastic voice followed by an even bigger smile.

“No. That’s it.”

Again, repeat walk to kitchen and continue back to customer’s table.

“Can I get some napkins please?”

…long tense pause…

Really? I just asked you if you needed anything else! Geeez.

“SURE!” I respond so up-beat and enthusiastically that it almost sounds rude.

Finally, after the customer has everything that he could possibly need in order to enjoy his burger, wings and french fries, I ask my shift leader to look over my section so I can head over to the checkout room and prepare my money bag.

“Did you wipe down your salt and pepper shakers?” he asks, staring me in the eye to see if I was going to lie to him.

You see, after a long stressful shift at work, some servers don’t clean their section properly or refill the table condiments. This means the closing servers at the end of night, usually one shift leader and another server, have to do those duties instead. Hence, the staring, lie detector contest.

“Yes,” I respond, firmly, returning the stare without a blink.

He turns away. Then, he picks up each salt and pepper shaker, taps it on the table, and lifts it up to the light to see if it was full. Of course, mine are always filled to the very top of the shaker. I learned that it was better to clean my section properly rather than redo it and waste more time at work.

“You’re good,” he says and waves me away.

“Yes!” I say, half jokingly and half relieved that I’m one step closer to going home.

I walk into the small, secured checkout room and say hi to the deposits lady, who reminds me of a bank teller sitting behind a plastic window waiting for my money.
“Yes! It feels so good to sit!” I exclaim, and I swear I hear that I heard the hallelujah chorus playing in full surround sound.

“Hell yah,” chuckles one of my coworkers.

After filling out all the paperwork, I turn in my money bag and count my tips for today: $200 for a double shift. I set aside $18 for my bartender, $10 for the food runners, and $18 for the bussers, leaving me with $154 for fourteen hours of work.

I claim my tips on the schedule computer, hit “enter” and clock out.

“Kara Day, clocked out at 1:30am on 11/05. 14 hours worked. Next scheduled shift: 11/05 at 11am” reads the computer.

Damn. I feel like I live here. I sleep at home and stay here all day, then go back to sleep and come back to work again the next morning.

“Hey Kara! We go drink tonight?” asks Moku.

“Nah. I can’t. I’m really tired and I had a rough night.”

“Oh. You still salty cuz of that table you had earlier, huh?” he asks.

“Haha. Yups. Damn customers have to make my life hard.”

“What’d they do? I thought you auto-graded them?” (For parties of 8 or more, an 18% automatic gratuity is added to the bill)

“Yah, I was supposed to, but they said that since only seven people sat on my table and the rest of the party was on cocktail side of the dining, they shouldn’t have to pay auto-grad. So after splitting their checks ten times, comping off three ‘Buy One Entrée, get One Free’ coupons, voiding off food that they didn’t like because it ‘tastes funny’ or ‘it was ice cold’ or ‘there was not enough meat’, I ended up getting a $9 tip on a $186 tab.”

“Wow! Rough!” said Moku as he gave me a hug. “Nah, nevermind them. We’ve all had days like that. That’s why we go drink after pau work, laugh a little, smoke a little, and shrug it off.”

Moku is right. I mean it isn’t that big of a deal by itself, but when multiple customers come in to eat and give me this “you’re-my-server-I’m-paying-you-do-whatever-I-ask-and-bring-me-my-food-now” kind of attitude, it irritates me just a little bit.

I get in my car and decide to just keep driving around, blasting Gary Jules’ “Mad World” while hanging my arm out the window, feeling the cool, brisk, late night breeze.
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slip through my fingers. I think about things: about why some people feel like they are entitled to treat me like a servant because they're supposedly going to tip, about why I'm a server, why I haven't quit my job yet.

“If your job makes you hate people so much, and you hate the way customers treat you, why don’t you just quit and find a new job?”

Someone once asked me that question. And I am now asking myself the same thing. Part of the answer would be for the tips, I guess. My paycheck means almost nothing to me. On a good night, my tips can match my paycheck. Tip is why I'm a server. Tip is what pays for my groceries, rent, loans, gas, ect. Tip is why I choose to work fourteen hours straight, standing, walking, lifting trays, cleaning. Tip is why I hate to smile, why I laugh at jokes that aren't funny, why I “happiness” is my only shown emotion to my customers. What is left of my paycheck after income taxes, federal withholding taxes, State tax, insurance deductions, and a bunch of other deductions, is what I call “lunch money”. Under the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act, servers or any employee who receives tips over $20 could legally be paid under minimum wage (sometimes as low as $4.35 per hour in some states). Tips = fast cash, in hand, every shift.

I keep driving, driving aimlessly thinking, thinking about how I first got into the business of serving, the business of fake smiles and insincere “thank yous,” the business of customer satisfaction on steroids, the business of money in exchange for faltering on one's dignity. I reminisce about my first days working at Chief's diner back home on Guam about two years ago. I was 19, and in desperate need of cash…

II

I walk into the small cramped, smoky kitchen, and I'm immediately overwhelmed. Servers are stacking more than five plates on their arms, balancing three drinks in one hand, buttering toast with the other; bussers are zooming in and out of the dish room; cooks are yelling things like: “Three steaks medium all day,” “How long for that half stack?” and “Eight-six hash browns!”
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My trainer pulls me to the dining room and explains the floor layout.

“That row is A-1 to A-; that row is B-1 to B5; the one across from it is C-1 to C-5. E-5 is over there behind E-4, but you can’t see it unless you walk there, so remember to check your section all the time. Okay, so that’s big dining. Let’s walk over to small dining.”

“We have two dining rooms?” I ask, very confused.

“Yes,” she responds, looking at me like I’m stupid for asking that question.

“So, do the tables have numbers labeled on them or something?”

My trainer just lets out a loud, sarcastic laugh and walks away. I later find out that I have to memorize all ten sections,(more than fifty tables) by the end of the week.

The next few days are chaotic. I learn that there are so many ways to cook eggs: scrambled, soft scrambled, scrambled dry, fresh scrambled, over easy, over medium, over hard, sunny side up, basted, poached soft, poached medium, poached hard, soft boiled, hard boiled, and so many other wondrous ways!

I learn that customers do not read the menu, and that they expect me to know everything, all four pages, front and back. You see, Chief’s is the only 24/7 diner in Guam. Naturally, the menu—breakfast, lunch, and dinner— is also 24/7. As part of my training, and in order to function efficiently at work, I have to memorize entrée’s components, the sides it comes with, the times it is available, and how much it costs. I also, have to know the types of questions to ask a customer. For example, if they want spam and eggs:

How would like your eggs done?
Would you like rice, hash browns, or pancakes?
Instead of plain rice would you like fried rice for an additional $1?
Would you like bread or a muffin?
Whole wheat or regular?
Toasted or not toasted?
Buttered or plain?

Forgetting a question would mess up the order, and I would have to redo it, wasting time and decreasing my chances of a good tip.
I stay close to my trainer, acting as her second shadow. I watch her suck up to customers as she takes their orders and writes them down in this weird, coded server shorthand that baffles me. Next, she coaches me through logging the orders into the computer.

“What is Spam FR/OE/PAN/WWT/B & FP NIC?” I ask, very confused.

“Spam fried rice, over easy egg, pancakes, whole wheat toast, buttered, and fruit punch, no ice,” she responds quickly while punching in the rest of order at lightning speed. “You need to learn shorthand, girl.”

Another part of serving is the difficult task of balance plates on my hands and arms. I dropped many plates and drinks while trying to master this essential skill, sometimes on the floor or on myself and occasionally on unsuspecting customers. My trainer would always tell me in this annoying, nagging voice: “You have to balance as many plates as you can so that you won’t have to go back and forth from the dining to the kitchen. It wastes time, and puts you behind.”

I usually mock her when she says this to me over and over and over during my training—I can’t help it if I’m horrible at juggling plates.

As days turn into weeks and weeks turn into months, I experience the hard parts of serving. Everything in the diner revolves around time management, the customers, and money. My feelings don’t matter. If customers complain because we are out of Beef Shank Soup, and after they waited an hour to be seated, all I can do is apologize, even though it my fault that the kitchen didn’t prepare enough soup for the Sunday rush. If a customer pinches my ass as I walked by, I ignore it because I can’t prove that he did, and it would be too much of a hassle to write a complaint about it anyways. If a customer walks out on his bill, or doesn’t leave enough money to pay, I have to pay for it out of pocket because I should have watched each of my eight tables—I’m held responsible. I feel like I have to choose between my dignity and customer satisfaction. If I tell my customer not to pinch my ass again, he’d probably leave just enough money for the bill or even short me the change, and then make up some stupid complaint about my attitude to my manager.

I try to remember the server steps I learned in training: greet table, drop off drinks, take orders, refill drinks, drop food, check back on table and see if food was
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made properly, pre-bus table, offer desserts, drop check and thank. I’m pressured to perform and over-perform, to stretch my limits for customers and, at the same time, to appease my managers’ high demands to sell, sell sell! I feel like a robot programmed to act happy and carefree, fully committed to doing whatever it takes to make sure that my customer’s eggs are cooked somewhere between over easy and over medium without being too runny or too dry and not burnt around the edges but perfectly crisp.

All customers receive whatever they want, when they want, however they want, and if their entrée isn’t cooked correctly or within the time limit that they deem proper, they could choose to have that item removed from their bill. If customers make a big enough fuss about something, our managers could give them a free meal or offer them a free dessert and always at the server’s expense. By this I mean that the server loses out on tip because 90% of the time, the customer will tip off the new discounted and adjusted bill, meaning that the server just jumped through rings of fire and braved treacherous threats from kitchen cooks to make sure that entree was cooked right…for FREE!

The most important thing I learned while working at Chief’s, was that my manager and coworkers were two-faced. When I observed them talking to their customers, they were polite (almost to the point that I found it rude), spoke “proper” English, and always smiled. Then, the minute they turned around, their smiles faded. When they came back into the safety and protection of the kitchen, they turned on their native accents, Palauan, Truuckese, Kosrean, Yapese, Ponpeian, Chamorro, Filipino, and complained or cracked jokes about their customers. It was as if a mask was put on when talking to customers and removed in the kitchen. This behavior fascinated me; I wondered if a mask would grow into my skin one day and never come off.

III

The restaurant is dim, lit with only with old-fashioned looking candles, lanterns and a huge, gaudy chandelier hanging in the lounge area. A contorted staircase twists beside a wall adorned with pictures of pasta, wine, and green country-sides. I stand at the foot of the stairs staring up, holding a tray full of steaming pasta marinaras, chicken fettucini alfredos, crab raviolis, garden salads, a side of meatballs, and a few glasses of iced tea.
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“Excuse me, please. Excuse me. Watch out!” I say as I maneuver my way through obstacles of hyper-energetic children up four flights of stairs to my section. My customers are mad because they’ve been waiting for their food.

“Finally, the food is here!” says one customer as he reaches for his food on my tray before I can set it down on a stand.

“Nooo! Don’t do that!” I yell, but I’m too late. The moment he grabs his entrée, my whole tray is thrown off balance, and down goes all the food I worked so hard to bring up the stairs.

There is a long, sad pause as I stare at the concoction of pastas, salads and iced-tea on the floor.

“Oops,” he says, still holding his plate of ravioli.

_Oops? Is that ALL you can say? Why don’t you offer to get down on your hands and knees and clean up your mess?_

“It’s okay. I’ll clean it up and be right back with some bread and salads while you wait for your new entrées to be made,” I say, forcing a smile while wiping the spilled pasta sauce off my pants.

I run down the stairs, but I can’t reach the bottom. It keeps moving and more and more stairs appear.

_I have to get to my customers on the other floors! They haven’t even received their drinks or salads yet. Why isn’t anyone here?_

Finally, I reach the second floor. My customers glare at me. One shakes her empty glass at me, another flails his hand in the air like he’s eager to answer a question from his teacher, a kid spills his cup of milk on the floor and his mother walks up to me asking me for a refill, and if the restaurant gives out free dessert for birthdays.

“No, we don’t, ma’am. We just sing.”

“What? We brought my son here so that we could get a free dessert!” says the mother angrily.

Well, _don’t get mad at me. I just work here; I don’t make the rules._

“I’m sorry, ma’am. All we can do is sing for him.”

“Well then, sing to my son. SING NOW!” responds the angry mother as she pushes me in front of hundreds of children waiting for me to sing.
“Sing! Sing! Sing! Sing!” chant the children in unison as they dance around my feet like little mini tribal people.

“I’m frozen. The room starts to spin. I try to run away but I’m not going anywhere. The floor under my feet turns into a huge treadmill set on the fastest mode. I try to keep up with the pace, trying to get away from those stupid kids!

So many things to do, so many kids, wait, this doesn’t make sense. Am I dreaming?

I shoot up in bed, heart racing, grabbing around for my tray of food. Then I realize that I’m just having another “spagmare,” a term that some of my former coworkers and I coined when I worked at The Old Spaghetti Factory.

“Thank god,” I whisper in total relief.

I check the time. It’s 10:10am: time to get up and get ready for work. For real this time.

IV

The dining room is empty, save for a few customers here and there, and everyone is bored. Our managers decide give all the servers cleaning duties since they’re tired of watching everyone stand around. I am assigned the glorious task of scrubbing the brick wall part of the dining room with cleaning product that makes my hands dry out and peel.

I don’t like scrubbing the walls in front of customers. I can feel them staring at me, snickering.

Punk kids, they’re just jealous because they can’t look good while cleaning a wall.

“Excuse me, ma’am!” says a lady wearing a skimpy little shiny dress and a whole lot of makeup. “I like, took pictures upstairs in the game area, and like, I left them on that table over there like, on accident. Do you know, like, where they are?”

Wow. You sure love the word ‘like’ don’t you?

“Um, what time did you eat here?” I ask.

“About like, thirty minutes ago. I really need those pictures because like, I took them with my boyfriend. I put them like, in a to-go bag.”
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“Well ma’am, I’m sorry. That table has already been cleaned. One of the bussers might have thrown it away.”

“No! You don’t like, understand. I like, need those pictures. I don’t care what you have to do, even like, go through the trash. I need those pictures,” she whines, pointing at me, adding in a stomp with her blue stilettos after every few words.

“Okay, well I’ll ask the busser where he might have thrown the trash and if he saw any pictures,” I say with a little shock and disbelief in my voice. Shock because I can’t believe that this lady is throwing a temper tantrum over cheap pictures, and disbelief because she just asked me to dig through the trash for her.

“Yah, you like, do that,” she says, crossing her arms.

Turns out that one of the bussers dumped the trash from that table in one of the bins in the middle of the dining room by our computer stations. And yes, I put my bare, dry, chemical-soaked hands into the trash and searched around for those very, very special pictures.

Okay, so where to start, which part of the trash seems the “cleanest?” Ugh. Is that a diaper? Ugh…shit…disgusting…really? Who would throw a diaper in here? God! Okay, wow. Just breathe. Oh, is that it? Nope, that is chewed food wrapped in a napkin. Wow…this sucks. Hmmm, wait, wait, okay, there! There they are! Thank god!

“Here they are. There’s some sauce or something on the bag, but the pictures should be clean.” I hand the distressed lady her pictures.

“Thanks!” she says as she toddles off to who I thought was her father—he wasn’t.

“Wow, that’s it? No ‘I appreciate you sticking your hands into the discarded, half-eaten food, used napkins, dirty diapers, and other random-shit-that-I-don’t-even-want-to-know-what-it-was filled trash for me’ or even a complete ‘thank you?’” I mumble to myself while giving rest of the brick walls a good, hard anger-driven scrubbing.

After only having been at work for two hours, most of which was spent scrubbing walls for under minimum wage, my manager cuts half the floor and sends us home.

“Yay! I made $7 today!” I say sarcastically to Gilbs.

“Ha! You beat me! I only have $5,” he jokes back as we head to the kitchen.
"I hate rolling silverware. If I get Carpel Tunnel Syndrome, can I get workers’ comp?" I joke.

"I think that would be a stretch to claim," says Gilbs.

"I know. I just hate it when my hands start to cramp from polishing silverware."

Polish.

Place silverware onto napkin.

Roll.

Stack.

Repeat until hands fall off.

I start to daydream, daydream about my home, my island and how much I miss it. I haven’t been home in over a year, which is the longest I have ever been away from Guam. I miss sitting on the fine, white sand of my favorite beach, watching the dark orange sun lay itself to rest as it sinks into the Pacific, creating a vast array of colors painted all over the evening sky. Many people have asked me where I'm from and when I say Guam, I get two responses:

1. “Where is that? It is a foreign country?”
2. “Really? My family is from there. Are you Chamorro? What’s your last name?”

I dislike both responses. The first because, after I explain that Guam is not a foreign or a third world country somewhere in South America, and that it is actually a tiny 209 square-mile island that you can drive around in about three hours located in the Pacific and owned by the United States, I usually get asked another chain of silly questions like:

“Do people still live in grass huts?”
“What kind of money do you use?”
“Does Guam have fruits other than bananas and coconuts like apples and grapes?”
“Are you sure it’s in the Pacific and not in South America?”

And the second because when I do run into people who are knowledgeable about Guam, they’ll find out that I'm not Chamorro, that I’m a Haolepino, a haole (meaning foreigner but used as a slang to refer to white people, especially military) Filipino.

Why is this a problem for me? Well, on Guam, the native race is Chamorro, and since the island is so small, almost everyone is related to somebody or knows someone that
you know. Since Guam was taken over by Spanish in 1668, then the Japanese and Americans in WWII and still remains a United States territory to this day, some Chamorros do not take kindly to those of us locals who look like haoles, military, or outsiders like Filipinos and Micronesians. It’s not that they’re racist; it’s more bitterness, a prejudice. This prejudice is understandable. I mean, if some foreign people came to your country, banned your language and your culture to the point where it was almost extinct, contaminated and destroyed your oceans, beaches and land, murdered your family and recruited what was left of the young men and women to fight in their war, brought over their fast food restaurant chains and huge department stores putting our local-owned mom and pop stores out of business, took over more and more historical and agriculture land, disabling us from being able to become a self-sustaining country again, and stationed thousands of military and military weapons on the land that you once played around on, and called your country their own, wouldn’t you be a little bitter as well?

Being half haole, yet local, I am a person without a country: a contradiction. When I used to work at Chief’s, a popular, local-owned diner that catered to locals but mostly Chamorros, I fell victim to many prejudiced remarks. The most frequently asked questions: “Where you born here?” and “What is your last name?” I dreaded these questions because then I knew I would be treated differently after my customer found out that my last name was not Chamorro, and that I was half haole. They’d usually respond by saying, “Oh…..” and then treat me like I knew nothing about the island or its lingo, like I was a tourist working at a local diner. This didn’t happen all the time, but it happened often enough that it made me aware of my race, caused me to feel shame for what I was.

An elderly couple once asked me who was cooking breakfast.

I told them, “Charles and Gary,” curious as the question.

“Are they Micronesian?”

“Yes, I believe so.” I responded uncomfortably.

“Don’t you know that they’re dirty? They chew pugua and spit everywhere.”(Pugua or “betelnut” is kind of local’s tobacco made from the areca tree’s seed)
No. We don’t allow pugua chewing here, and they aren’t dirty. They are nice people and cook really good food,” I said, shocked to hear these prejudiced remarks. My customers didn’t respond, but I could tell that they were unmoved by my protests…

“Kara? Did you hear anything I just said?” asks Gilbs, with an irritated look on his face.

“Huh? What did you say?” I respond, shaking myself out of a daydream.

“Wow! Nevermind you then, always daydreaming every time I try talk to you.”

“Wow! Nevermind you! At least I keep working while I daydream. See! We pau already,” I say, showcasing the finished, neatly rolled silverware.

V

Cue Smile.

“Hi folks. How are we doing tonight?”

…silence…

“Okay…well my name is Kara, and I’ll being serving you this evening. Can I start you folks off with some drinks? Maybe a soda or a beer?”

“Why you got so much pens on you?”

“Well, sometimes I need to close multiple checks at one time, so I have to carry a lot of pens. And sometimes not all my pens are left on the table, so I have to carry even more pens.”

“That’s what tips is for,” says the customer with a big smirk on his face.

…silence…

“Nah…I’m just playin’ wit chu,” he says to his friends and to me.

“So did we decide on drinks?” I say with a firm, straight face, obviously not amused at the “joke”.

“Yah I’ll have Sprite,” says one customer.

“I’ll have a fruit punch,” says another.

“Where ur drinks at?” asks the jokester customer as he fumbles around with the menu in a panic.
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“It’s listed under drinks. No, you missed it. One more page over. No, the other way. Okay, you’re looking at it. There you go,” I say as I help him navigate our complicated three-paged menu.

“Oh. Um okay. I’ll get a…hmmmm…’yall got some grape juice?”

Really? If it’s not listed there then we don’t fucking have it!

“No sir, we don’t. We only have orange, pineapple, and cranberry juice. It’s all there in the menu.”

“Oh. I’ll just get a fruit punch, too.”

“Alright. I’ll be right back with those drinks.”

Cut smile.

“Kara! Hey Kara, wanna come help me sing?” asks Gilbs.

“Ugh, okay sure, really quick though. I have to get drinks for my customers. What table?” I say with reluctance.

“Okay okay, it’s ninety-five,” he replies, placing a candle on top of brownies and whipped cream.

A few more servers gather by the table. We form a semicircle around the birthday boy, who just turned two, and wait for Gilbs to make the announcement.

“Attention everyone, we have a birthday in the house! It’s Asher’s second birthday today! So on the count of three, let’s all sing to Asher. Ready, one, two, three! Happy birthday to you! WHOO!”

I sing the stupid song; it’s the sixth time I’ve had to sing it today. I sing, not with a smile, but with angst.

I hate this song. Why do parents put us and their kids through this? I mean, this kid is crying now because we startled him. He doesn’t even know what that candle is for. Oh, look, he’s trying to touch the flame. That’s so awesome! Now we’ll be blamed for putting a dangerous object near a toddler. Oh good, Gilbs moved the dessert farther from Asher.

“Happy birthday to you! WHOO!”

I keep singing in the most unenthusiastic, monotone voice ever heard in the world, no, in the UNIVERSE! I stare at the kid, who has now stopped crying after his mother shoved some whipped cream in his mouth.
“Happy birthday dear Asher! WHOO! WHOO!"

I stare at the mother, who is videotaping us singing with her iPhone. Great, now this parent can show her kid how she and his daddy made the servers at DiBs sing to him on his second birthday. Asher can see how happy we all are to sing to him. Asher can see how happy mommy and daddy are because they got a free birthday dessert, even though DiBs does not give out free desserts. Instead, we have to ring-in a side of brownies, top them with whipped cream, chocolate syrup and a candle. Then, find a manger to comp off the brownies. Then get the manager to sign the comp. Then claim the comp in the checkout room, and hope that this “free dessert” is tax deductible. Asher can see how happy I am NOT right now. Damnit! Get that camera out of my face!

“Happy birthday to you! Yay!”

Clap…Clap…Clap…

We wait for Asher to blow the candle out.

“Asher, come on. Blow out the candle!” says the mother as she coaches her son on candle-blowing techniques.

And we continue to wait.

Come on Asher, blow out the candle, I got other things to do!

“Blow it! Yes, one more! Blow! Yay, Asher!”

Clap…Clap…Clap…

Why am I still doing this? Why do I put myself through this humiliation, this degrading treatment on a daily basis? Is the money really worth it? Do I even smile when I’m actually happy? Is my smile even real?

I open the double kitchen doors and let out a huge “grrrrrrrrraaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!” as I prepare the drinks for the jokester’s table.

Take deep breath.

Cue smile.

“Here we are guys, two fruit punch and a Sprite. Okay, are we all ready to order?”

“Y’all got some fried chicken here?” asks the jokester.
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“No sir, we do not. We have barbecue chicken, cabo style chicken and chicken fingers, which would probably be the closest thing to fried chicken.”

“Aight, I’ll have me one of those wit some ranch on da side,” replies the jokester after he slurps down half his drink. (Server shorthand: CHK FIN/ S-RCH)

“I’ll just have the chicken and ribs, with no mashed potatoes; I want french fries instead,” says another customer. (Server shorthand: CHK+RIB/ NO MASH W FF)

“Okay, and for you sir?” I ask the last customer.

“I’ll have some potato skins with no green onion, side of ranch and the parmesan chicken alfredo.” (Server shorthand: SKIN/ NO GRON/S-RCH/ PARM AL)

“Okay folks, I’ll just take your menus.”

I punch in the orders and go to my next table. It’s a five top, a mother and four kids. My first assumption is that I might not get a big tip, and then my assumption is confirmed once I see the mother pull out a coupon from her purse. They order some nachos and cheese sticks for appetizers, four kids’ meals and a grilled sirloin steak. (Server shorthand: NACH+CHEES ST/ 2-KMAC/KGR CHK/KBURG/GR SIR MR)

“Okay folks, I’ll take your menus and be right back with your appetizers.”

“Can we use this coupon, please?”

Ugh, I knew it.

“Sure! No problem,” I say with a big smile. Surprisingly, her children are very polite and always say “thank you” after they asked me for something.

How refreshing, I wish all the children were that polite.

My anger was beginning to subside; it has been awhile since I have had a pleasant customer.

I guess I don’t mind the coupon; they seem so nice…

“Aye! Aye Miss, Can I get a refill please, and no ice this time,” says the jokester customer, lifting his empty glass in the air.

Are you serious? Why do you have to call me “miss”? Don’t you remember my name? And do you really have to shake your glass in the air like an impatient child?

“Sure thing, I’ll be right back,” I say flashing a smile.

I return to the jokester’s table with their food and his refill.

“Can I get you folks anything else?” I say after passing out the food.
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…silence…

“Okay…enjoy your meal.”

I check on my other table. The food runner has already delivered their meals. The family is just eating, laughing, and talking.

“Excuse me, ma’am. May we have refills of Sprite please?” asks one of the children.

“Sure, no problem.”

I walk into the kitchen to make some refills.

“Don’t you hate it when your customers don’t respond to you when you ask a question?” I ask Kehau.

“Yah gurl, so awkward. I never like ask them questions like ‘How are we doing’ or ‘How does everything taste’ cuz they never like answer me, then I look stupid.” She says while chopping lemons and limes for her drinks.

“Yah, I know, right. My table eight-one is like that. They just chew their food like no one’s talking to them, like I’m invisible.”

“If you went spill your drinks on them, guarantee they goin’ listen.” Kehau laughs as she walks away.

“I wish I could,” I say to myself before walking out of the kitchen.

Cue smile again.

The joker’s table finishes their meals and ask me to split the check.

Typical. Why do customers assume that I can remember everything that they order? Sure, two to three customers are fine, but if it’s an eight top or a twelve top, they’re asking for a long, stressful wait. Now I have to remember what each person had, then split the checks on the computer and print them out. And if I’m wrong, then I’ll have to go back to the computer, split everything the right way, find a manager so that he can reprint my check, which is a pain especially when it’s a busy night, and give the new checks to the table. Now I’m behind because I took too long trying to split checks and the host has just double sat my section. I wish customers would tell me that they want split checks before they order.

(Note: The Micros computer system does not allow employees to reprint checks. Also, if a customer hands me cash and another gives me his card, I have to calculate the change in my head since Micros won’t compute the
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change for me unless I have the final signed check from the customer with the card. This process is complicated, and closing out checks is even more so. Hence, if one must split the check, please tell your server before anything has been ordered.)

I split and print out three bills, place them in our black leather check presenter books and drop them off at the table.

One customer hands me his card, and the other hands me cash with no change. The jokester hands me his check presenter book open, so everyone can see how much tip he was giving me.

“Here you go. Keep the change, okay?”

He grins.

“Okay. Thanks?” I say as I stare at what he hands me.

His bill was $18.98 and he left me a $20.

$1.02? Really? Why are you smiling so big? Do you really think that a dollar and two cents is a good tip, or are you trying to be a jerk?

I watch them leave, keeping my focus more on the jokester, still dumbstruck at the way he handed me the check presenter. I always wondered how customers could thank their server, tell her that she was wonderful and made their dinner worthwhile, then stiff her, leaving little to no tip, or even worse, not even pay the bill. Half of me just wanted to slap the smile right off the jokester’s face.

It’s okay Kara. Karma’s a bitch.

When my family table left, they stacked the remaining plates nicely in one spot, and left me a $10 tip on an $81.52 bill. I don’t mind that it isn’t the best tip; they were a pleasant family that actually answered me when I asked if everything was okay. They treated me with respect, which sometimes is worth more than an extra two or three dollars.

VI

There are three of them, three old men. Each has a beer gut, an orange looking tan, and Aloha button down shirts.

“Creepers,” I whisper to Rocky as I watch them walk to my section.

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“Hi folks. My name is Kara and I’ll be taking care of you guys today. Can I start you all off with some drinks? Maybe a bottle of wine?”

“Well, hello there. Kara is such a pretty name for a beautiful girl,” says one old man, who is wearing an Aloha shirt one size too small.

Gross. What a pervert.

I try to keep myself from gagging at the sight of his belly hair that peeks through the button holes of his shirt.

“You should work at Hooters,” says another old man, who is clearly wearing a toupee.

Why? So you can see my boobs better? You should accept your baldness, and stop wearing that sorry excuse of a toupee.

“No, that’s okay. I like my job here.”

“We’ll have a bottle of your finest Sauvignon Blanc,” says another old man with a wink, who seems to be the youngest of the three and definitely does not act his age. “And why don’t you bring along three fresh-tossed garden salads as well, with vinegar and oil on the side.

Finest? You think you that by ordering a $12 bottle of wine that that is going to make you look sophisticated huh, Mr. Big Spender? And you make decisions for your friends too? Wow! What a sophisticated guy!

“Alright folks, no problem. I’ll be right back with your salads and wine.”

At work, the bartender is the only person who handles bottles of wine; we call it tableside wine service.

The bartender presents the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc to my customers.

“Yes, yes, that looks like a fine bottle,” replies small shirt guy.

“Hey, don’t you have to let the wine breathe for awhile?” remarks the hooter’s lover, who obviously does not know anything about wine.

I place their “fresh-tossed” salads on the table, holding in a snicker at his comment.

“Umm… that’s only for red wine, sir. White wine does not need to ‘breathe,’” replies my bartender.
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“No, all wine need to breathe, everyone knows that,” The customer replies arrogantly, getting his buddies to laugh and agree with him.

“If you say so,” says the bartender as he finishes pouring the wine.

“Yuck. This wine is not sweet,” says “fresh-tossed” salad guy.

“Most wines are not sweet, sir. However, if you would like sweet wine, you could mix it with some Sprite to water-down the taste of the wine.”

Wow…would you like some little kiddy sparkling apple cider instead? That’s sweet.

After the bartender leaves the table, I take their orders, ignore the many crude and inappropriate comments they make, and leave them to enjoy their wine.

“What time you get off tonight, pretty lady?” asks small shirt guy as he finishes his meal, wiping the alfredo sauce from his chin.

UGH! Will these guys never quit with the crude comments? I mean seriously, I could charge all of you with sexual harassment.

“I’m not sure. Anything else I can get you folks tonight?” I say quite annoyed.

“Your number,” responds Hooter’s guy.

Ick! I’m about to throw up right now. This is so wrong. This isn’t even worth any amount of tip. I just want them out!

“Okay…I’ll be right back with the bill,” I say, ignoring the comment.

I drop the bill to the table and thank them for coming and to have a nice evening.

“Bye bye cutie! We left cash on the table. Maybe we’ll see you at Hooters tonight huh?

Bye bye perverts! I hope you have fun hiring hookers to keep you company, because no woman in her right mind would chill with you guys for free, sober, or even drunk for that matter!

“Nope, I don’t think so. Have a good night.”

They left me with a dirty table, a full bottle of wine, and enough cash for half their bill.

“Really? Walk out on your bill and take my pen? Okay, I’ve had it!”

I run after them, bill in hand, in a furious rage. I race through the restaurant, pass the lounge area, and almost knock down one of my managers as he tries to stop me.
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I’m all heated, fist tight, face tense and red with anger. I feel unstoppable, empowered by my rage. Finally, I spot them smoking cigarettes by the curb waiting for a taxi.

“Excuse me!” I bark. “You didn’t leave enough money to pay for the bill, and you took my pen!”

“Hey there, beautiful. I knew you would come after us. I’ll pay, if you give me your number.”

“No thanks. You and your friends are a little too old and gross for me. If you want company, I’m sure a Hooter’s girl would love to shake her boobs for you for some cash.”

“What did you say to me? Huh?” he says, grabbing my arm, pulling me towards him.

“I said, you need a breath mint,” I yell as I cock my hand back and punch him as hard as I can.

He falls to the ground, nose bleeding, his buddies staring.

“I’ll take that,” I say, grabbing my pen from his shirt pocket.

“Now, who is going to pay for this bill, huh?” I say, turning towards the other two guys.

I turn around to see that a crowd has gathered. I spot my manager and some of my co-workers. Rocky starts to clap, then a few of my coworkers join her, then my manager, then more people, and more and more until everyone is clapping for me. The applause grows louder and louder, like thunder rumbling in the clouds. The crowd surrounds me, clapping and clapping. I start feeling dizzy. The crowd starts spinning, faster and faster, faces blending, colors mixing together, becoming one spinning mass. I can’t breathe. The noise is so loud, then it stops, then it starts, then it stops. It doesn’t sound like clapping anymore. It sounds like…honking??

“What’s going on? Why am I still in my car? Did I fall asleep?” I say, waking from my daze. “Oh my god! I’m at a stop light.”

The light is green and the driver behind me is honking furiously.

Was everything just a dream?

I quickly started to drive. I look down at my clothes.

I’m still in my work clothes…Did I even go home at all?
After some very careful driving, I finally arrive home and walk straight to my comfy bed. I lie there, surrounded by my many pillows, in disbelief that everything was just a dream.

*I wish I could have actually punched that jerk, instead of letting them go. I guess he really pissed me off since I had a dream about that night.*

I check my phone for the date. It’s 2:15 in the morning, November 5th. Only forty-five minutes have passed since I left work earlier this evening.

“Holy shit…it seemed so real…” I say, slowly closing my dreary eyes, relaxing my body from another stressful shift at work.