

# A FISTFUL OF SPOONS

BY PATTY GRAY

After college, during a long spell of failed impetus, I earned my rent money for a few years by waitressing. That is what we called it back then, the gendered gerund. We referred to ourselves as “waitrons.” It was the 1980s.

One of my later waitressing jobs was at a seafood restaurant in an ancient brick building in Ann Arbor’s yuppifying downtown. The Cracked Crab was the kind of place I would have asked my parents to take me for dinner when they visited me at college; it felt a bit more upscale than the bistro near campus where I had first learned my trade, perhaps because of the downtown location and the black-and-white tile floor, or perhaps because of the black aprons that tied at the waist and draped dramatically to mid-calf.

I had just returned from squandering my previous earnings on a summer bike trip through Europe, and I needed another job; so when I saw a sign in the window of The Cracked Crab, I walked in off the street to apply. The manager was a tall, stern, imposing man perhaps twenty years my senior; he had a tendency to learn forward, which made him seem to occupy more space than he required. He sized me up and considered me sufficiently experienced to be hired for the dinner shift. He put me on the schedule for that very night, which disappointed me greatly, as I had been looking forward to resting on my laurels for a day or two after my tremendous feat of having gotten a job.

On that first night, I shadowed an experienced waiter to learn the menu and observe the expected etiquette. He was charming to the diners, serving their meals with efficiency and flair, thoroughly relaxed and in his element as he moved about the floor. When he served a plate of Dungeness crab to one customer, he explained at length

the messy process of cracking the shell to extract the meat, and joked, “Yeah, you kinda have to take a shower after.” The diners laughed. I laughed. He served several more plates of Dungeness crab that night, and said the same thing after serving each one.

Away from the diners, though, he seemed a bit nervous. Out on the floor amongst the tables, waitrons perform; I knew that, and I had long since perfected that art. At my last place, there had been a backstage area where we could hide from the diners, bitch about difficult tables to the kitchen staff, grab a sip of something refreshing, decompress, and then pump ourselves up to get back out there for the next act. It was a sacrosanct space of employee bonding, and our shifts were measured by the accumulated quality of the brief moments we spent there. I expected to start bonding with my new waiter-guy friend in such a space.

But at the Cracked Crab, the manager occupied that space. He was always there, leaning over orders the kitchen staff had placed under the heat lamps, leaning toward the salad station as waitrons prepared side salads, leaning toward any two employees who seemed about to linger for a moment together. And he yelled. I don’t mean a kind of loud, motivational coaching; he was yelling *at the staff*. I had never seen a boss behave that way, and I must have been gaping in disbelief as I watched him yell at others, because then he yelled at me. On my first night.

The space of this restaurant was inverted; backstage was anyplace the manager wasn’t, and since the manager had enough sense not to let his yelling be heard by paying customers, the safest space was out on the floor, where diners wouldn’t yell at you as long as you were charming and efficient.

I did discover another safe place,

however: a labyrinthine basement where all the supplies were kept—freshly laundered linens, plates and cups, flatware and barware, extra salt and pepper shakers, all the paraphernalia that gets distributed across the surfaces of a restaurant. On that first night, another waitron led me down the creaky wooden steps to show me where to find the various things I might be sent to fetch. It was quiet and cool, with dramatic bare-bulb lighting, casting pools of shadow that looked like refuges.

The next night, I started picking up my own tables. The manager yelled. I served Dungeness crab, and tried out the *gotta shower afterwards* line on my diners. They laughed. The manager yelled. I got bigger tips than I used to get at the last place I worked. The manager yelled. I marveled at all the different kinds of flatware they had down there in that basement.

On the third night, the manager didn’t put me on the schedule, but he put me “on call.” This meant I might be asked to come in on short notice if there was a bigger rush of diners than he anticipated. That meant I had to stay near my phone. One’s phone number was hard-wired into one’s place of residence in those days. At the age of twenty-five, I wasn’t accustomed to spending my nights off at home. I sat there that evening with the realization that I was not at work, I was not getting paid, and yet that manager was still controlling me. As the evening got later, I got cozy and sleepy with a book. Then he called me in, his voice urgent over the din of the restaurant. The rush was practically over by the time I arrived. I made almost no tips.

I had a regular shift the next night. On a break from the yelling, I went to admire that flatware in the basement. It was arrayed on rough wooden shelves in a dark, dank, brick-



walled alcove, but it felt like being in a department store. The flatware was brand new and shiny; one box was full of long-handled spoons each with a teardrop-shaped bowl and an elegant little flare at the end of the handle. I picked one up. It was simple and streamlined, and as my thumb brushed the smooth steel and rested in the bowl, my aesthetic synapses were firing like mad, dripping serotonin throughout my agitated brain. I put the spoon in my apron pocket. I looked over my shoulder. I put three more spoons in my pocket, because what's the point of having one outstanding long-handled

spoon? A set was in order. I had earned it the night before as I sat tethered to my landline.

After a couple more regularly scheduled shifts, I found myself again sitting at home, on call, glaring resentfully at the telephone all evening long. I couldn't even kill time by calling a friend, since it would tie up the line. The manager may as well have had that telephone cord wrapped around my neck. I seethed. Then he called.

"I need you in here now!"

The yelling was coming through the telephone cord, into my apartment.

I flashed back to a lonely road in France the summer before, to the clicking sound of my bicycle as I coasted, untethered, entirely at liberty. I reflected on the fact that the next day was payday. I would get my first check. It had probably already been printed.

"No," I said.

"What? What did you say?"

"No, I can't come in. I quit."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes."

After a long pause, all he said was, "Fine."

And I was free.

And I had the spoons. ■



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