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They Always Call You "Miss"

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There's more to waiting tables than you might think. It takes courage, for one thing. You walk up to a table, and everyone turns to look at you, as if you're about to deliver the opening line of a play. You have to look happy all the time too. You have to look happy but concerned, bending forward while they talk, listening carefully, asking, "Ranch or Thousand Island?" You have to act as if you know what you're doing and everything is going according to a plan. You can't think of all the things happening in the kitchen. You have to remember: *Gin and tonic to table 8; man at 12 is late for a meeting; nut allergy on 5*. You have to remember it all and not get overwhelmed.

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— Ed.

Each table is a clean slate and a chance for things to go right. You can't think of what you've done wrong, what you might do wrong, what you might forget, all the mistakes you've made or could make. You need a clear mind.

You have to bring the food quickly, so that no one has to wait too long, but not so quickly that they feel rushed. You have to get the right food to the right people, and you can't spill anything or drop any plates, and you have to remember to bring coffee and ketchup and Tabasco and all the things they forgot to ask for the first time, when you were writing it down.

You have to keep busy, but you can't point out that you're busy, that you only have two hands, that they are not the only customers in the restaurant. And you have to do it all with a smile.

They all want to be special. They all want something different: They're in a hurry, or they're taking their time. They want you to joke with them, or they want you to leave them alone. They want you to care, but you must not worry. If they see you worry, they'll think you're spineless, and there's nothing they hate more than a spineless waitress. They'll jump on you every time and then not tip. And maybe you'll do everything right, but they'll jump on you anyway: because the table was dirty; because the food didn't come or, when it did, it smelled bad or tasted funny; because the fish was still frozen in the middle and hadn't you told them it was fresh?

They want to special-order, when the menu clearly says, NO SUBSTITUTIONS. They want a tuna-salad sandwich when we've already moved on to the dinner menu. They don't think of the waitress in her little tennis shoes getting varicose veins. They think of the sign outside that seemed to promise something better. They sit in their booths and remember the Chinese place they drove past down the street, and they think up ways to punish you for their own bad judgment.

They have allergies to gluten or shellfish. They're vegetarians but they can eat chicken, or they can eat fish but no chicken, fish but no bottom fish, salmon but no hatchery salmon, oil but no butter, butter but no oil. Some can eat neither fish nor chicken, but they can have milk and eggs. Others can have milk, but no eggs, or vice versa, and some can have no chicken, no fish, no eggs, no milk, *and* no cheese.

You never saw such delicate people in your life. They can't have alcohol, poor things. They have systemic yeast and can have no wine, soy sauce, bread, or mushrooms. Some can have no sugar, others no salt. They don't eat fat, and everything has to be steamed. They drink only nonfluoridated water. They want margarine, or they are against margarine on principle. They have opinions about everything.

You can't tell them to shut up. You can't tell them to be grateful. You've got to look concerned and interested. You have to smile and pretend you don't think they are a bunch of spoiled babies.

One day I got a bag lady. She sat at table 3, near the kitchen, and all she ordered was hot water for her tea. She was my age. She had all her bags spread out on the floor around her. She had long, matted hair and no front teeth. It was sum-

mer on the Oregon coast, and the restaurant was full of people on vacation.

I asked if she'd like a sandwich, and she said, "I don't eat meat."

I brought her a vegetarian sandwich and soup, on the house. Everyone who worked in that restaurant knew about hard times. The cooks filled a bag with food for her: cheese and vegetables and German bread. The bread was our specialty; the recipe was the owner's grandmother's.

She ate the sandwich and the soup, and then she dug into the bag and ate all that, too, even though it was for later.

"How is it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I prefer soy cheese." And then she shook her bread at me. "And I don't usually eat debris," she said.

Debris? That means "rubbish," doesn't it?

"Debris," she said, and she waved her bread at me. Mrs. Reinke's recipe, all the way from Germany.

"Usually I just eat raw food," said the homeless woman at table 3.

My whole section was full, and people were waiting to sit down. It was the busy season, when we try to make up for how little we earn the rest of the year. If the kids are going to the dentist, if anyone is getting a new coat, if we're going to get gravel for the drive or new tires for the truck, it's going to happen in the summer.

If you've never worked in a restaurant, it might not occur to you that each table is money to the waitress. You want big spenders, and you want to get them in and out. That's the ugly side to waitressing. There is something inherently corrupting about getting your money from tips, but there you have it.

I had eight tables, and one of them was the bag lady. I stood at her table. "Raw food?"

"For the enzymes," she said. "My usual diet is raw juice."

"Like orange juice?"

"Juice!" she exclaimed. "From fresh, raw berries." She motioned to her bags spread out on the floor. "I carry my juicer with me." Then she added, "It's good for the digestion."

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