

An Adventure In Waitressing

By Lisa Heath

Waiting tables can be a great way to make a living. The pay is good (in the right restaurant), the shifts are less than 8 hours (again, in the right restaurant), and the cast of characters is always entertaining. Once you have worked a few different kinds of restaurants, you can pretty much work anywhere you want. I had a fantasy of spending the winter where I could wear shorts every day and keep a tan without trying too hard. Since I have been in the restaurant business in one capacity or another for most, o.k., ALL of my adult life, I decided to make my dream come true, and headed out to Key West, FL for sun and adventure.

The shorts and tan were no problem, but finding a good job proved a little tough. The restaurant I ended up working in was a little seafood place that sat right on the water. It served mainly fried fish and had been owned by the Garrison Family for 40 years. During my employ, the Eldest Son and his wife, Diane, were in charge. Diane was a small, emotionally fragile, whiny voiced woman, who communicated in pouts and always looked a little depressed. She had married the Eldest Son with visions of marrying a fabulously wealthy restaurateur and having lots of children, but for now (and I suspect a long time), had ended up a day waitress, something she had never done before. Betty was most definitely the Senior Waitress. She had weathered 23 tourist seasons with the Garrison Family and remembered most of them in great detail (much to the delight of the rest of us). She and Diane had been in a legendary battle for Lunch Waitress Supreme for many years. Diane usually got her way, mainly because she was married to the Eldest Son, but Betty hung in there, the restaurant being her life. Myself and 5 other gals were the \$2.00 an Hour Group, waitresses hired only for the season, and paid a ridiculously low wage. Diane worked days, the \$2.00 an Hour Group worked nights, and Betty worked both.

Now on this particular day, the \$2.00 an Hour Group was arriving for the dinner shift and observing the usual mayhem. I don't care where you work, there is usually confusion while the night shift takes over for the day shift. The kitchen is trying to set up for dinner, while cooking the last few lunches that always seem to include the food they just put away. In most places there is a twenty minute window where dinner customers have to wait and if this has ever happened to you it's usually because the baked potatoes aren't ready yet. Anyway, I had just walked in and observed that the cooks were cranky and that Diane and Betty looked a little panicked. I walked to the dining room and saw several small groups and a party of 20, looking at menus. Diane asked if I could come on a little early and wait on the big group, as she and Betty had their hands full. I saw no problem starting my night off with a (hopefully) sizable tip.

I started towards the table just as Betty passed quickly by and said something like "I tried to tell them migsh hejkeuhh. . ." I was more interested in getting to the table than have her repeat what she had said, so I kept going. I could hear them laughing and talking amongst themselves and I realized I couldn't understand a word they were saying. Oh boy, I thought, another game or waitress charades, category: food. I stepped up with my really-patient smile and turned to the first woman who pointed at a dinner entrée on the menu. I tried to speak clearly and slowly as I explained we were not quite ready for dinner yet. But before I could get to the "it will only be about 15 minutes" part, a man at the other end of the table stood up and said in perfect English, "That's it. . . we're outa here!" They all pushed back their chairs, stood, and began filing out of the restaurant. I was a little confused as I tried to replay what it was I said that had offended them. Betty brushed by me again, saying "I told them ttdkgjeusklnt. . ." and Diane was pitifully hanging on to the last two people, trying to explain "baked potato" in a loud whiny voice. I turned my attention back to Betty and realized that she was mumbling shyly because she had already BEEN to the table and tried to pantomime the fact that we weren't ready for dinner, yet. But, due to the amount of shifts she had been working (all of them) and being a little short tempered, she had managed to display the international signs for "cranky" and "surly" She had probably made them mad without them ever understanding a word (except for the sly guy at the end of the table). The customers were gone and Diane stood alone holding their menus. She turned and I could see the anger rising in her. Diane was way ahead of me and knew exactly what had happened. We had lost a party of 20 dinners and there was only one person to blame. She whipped past me and after that person who was in the kitchen; and another Battle of the Lunch Shift was about to be underway!

Have you ever been in the situation where you cannot avoid someone else's confrontation? It's kind of like trying to get gum off your fingers. Just when you think you have the problem solved, you realize it's still there. Well, if you have, then you can understand what happened to me next. I could not get away from them. Betty sweeping through the restaurant, Diane with her short little legs trying to keep up with her to reprimand her (after all, SHE was right this

time). Back and forth, they went into the kitchen, around the dining room. Betty wouldn't slow her pace, she didn't want to hear it, especially from her nemesis, Diane. And no matter where I went, they seemed to be following.

Then it happened. I was walking through the kitchen door just in time to hear Betty say, "F. . . you Diane." She had said it a little under her breath, but I knew that tone and sentiment. I had not misunderstood that. Diane however, had not really heard her, or was feigning shock. At any rate, she changed her tune to "what did you say?" as she continued following Betty. Things really got crazy. The Family moved silently about holding private meetings in strange areas of the restaurant. They called in the Eldest Son's Father. Diane followed the Eldest Son around, trying to show how "hurt" she was and really working up a good whine. They spoke in hushed tones, but you could tell something big was about to happen. And sure enough, ten minutes later, in a swirl of purse, sweater, and tears, Betty was leaving 23 years behind her and was out the door, unceremoniously fired. No watch, no thanks for the memories, no t-shirt, nothing. The \$2.00 an Hour Group was stunned. I had worked at this restaurant only two weeks, but with this firing had immediately been elevated to "senior waitress" at night! It was going to be a great winter.

The next day I arrived to work and went to check in with The Eldest Son and Diane. However, I was surprised to find Betty sitting at the waitress hang-out table and yucking it up with Diane. She saw me and immediately gave me a list of things that needed to be done for the dinner shift. If I hadn't observed the events of the day before, I would never have known anything had been wrong. Well, as it turns out, it had all been a misunderstanding. Betty explained, to me and the other members of the \$2.00 an Hour Group, that Diane had in fact not heard her correctly and that she did NOT say the "F" word to the wife of the Eldest Son. She had apparently called the Eldest Son's Mother the next morning and explained herself and, gosh, after 23 years. . . .

Meanwhile, back in the waitress area, the members of the \$2.00 an Hour Group tried to imagine just what Betty had said to Diane. We decided Betty must have said something like "Move your TRUCK Diane", or "Good LUCK Diane" or "Go feed your DUCK Diane". But we now knew that we too could get a night off if we offended foreigners and mumbled obscenities to the Eldest Son's wife.

That was three years ago and I'll bet they are still there, going at it, battling for the position of Lunch Waitress Supreme.



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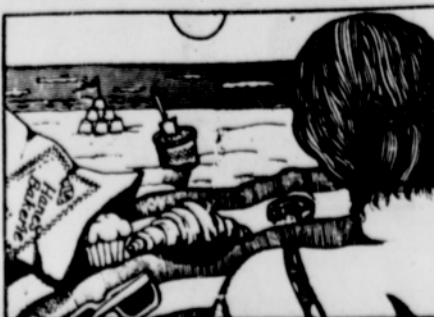
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