

# Waitressing and Us

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## Best of Nonfiction

*For all the ones who got away*

Year I

The cafeteria was pretty busy my first night at Gray Brother's, a local cafeteria that had been around since the 40s. When people came to visit, you took them to Gray's. It was unique, one-of-a-kind. Something you could call your own. At the entrance, sat a massive assembly line for your dinner sat in front of you. You grabbed your tray, napkins, silverware, dessert (yes, before the main course), and then the kind workers behind the counter asked what you'd like and you'd pick a meat and sides, rolls or muffins, and a drink and you would seat yourself.

I worked there for roughly six years. That's the thing about Gray's. You either worked there for a few days, weeks, or months, or you were there for years and people thought, "May I never have the luck of that person."

I was nervous my first night, wearing my black dress pants, non-slip shoes, full apron, "girl" bowtie, and maroon short-sleeved button-up. However, I quickly found a rhythm: introduce, take trays, check on, refill drinks, buss table, answer the bell, and repeat. Except "answer the bell" was more like every few minutes. Because Gray's attracted the older generation, a doorbell was installed and the cashiers rang it every time someone needed help carrying their tray. This bell was the annoyance of the entire restaurant. It was like some kid kept playing ding-dong-ditch without running from the door but wanting to chat every two minutes.

I met Donald toward the end of the night. He'd come in to check his schedule and I saw him out of the corner of my eye as I bussed a table. He watched me as he talked to one of our co-workers. He was average height, skinny, and had glasses. A little scruffy. He was cute. I admit it. That night all he did was introduce himself and I don't know that we talked about much else, but I knew from the start that he was attracted to me. Typically, I would've second guessed it.

Maybe he was just being nice. But with Donald, there was no denying it.

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"He's so annoying," one girl said.

"He creeps me out," said another. We were in the break room, taking one of two of our five-minute breaks for the evening. I ate some crackers dipped in strawberry jam (free).

"He's not that bad," I said. They shrugged.

When I got back to my section it was dead. Donald leaned against his hutch, pulling off the slouchy, I-don't-want-to-be-here look seamlessly. The quick and (hopefully) interesting history of hutches is as follows: the hutches are wood and quite large, larger than most grandmothers would have in their kitchens or dining rooms. They have glass windows where antiques are displayed. But more importantly, they have just about every single thing a server would need: pitchers of sweet tea, un-sweet tea, water, coffee, boxes, ketchup, and all the other necessary condiments. Just about every server had their own. They were our property. Mess with someone's hutch or steal their water pitcher and you were in for it.

"Victoria," he said. "My someday wife." Maybe it is odd that he greeted me this way, but it was our normal. He put his arm around my shoulders. I side stepped away and tried to shimmy out from under his arm.

"You know, you're the kind of girl any guy would want to marry."

Despite shrugging his arm off, I smiled. I always did, and I hated it because I didn't want to encourage him.

"Whatever," I said. What I really wanted to say was: Donald, people wouldn't think you were such a creep if you wouldn't act like one.

For the rest of the night, I found random bits of trash and straw wrappers hidden on my hutch. Each one was like a treasure hunt. Donald would walk by, smile mischievously, and I'd know he'd hidden something somewhere. I took them and put them back on his hutch. No matter how much I shrugged him off, I seemed to always give in just enough to encourage him.

## Year 2

The honest truth that took me years to admit is this: I looked forward to working with Donald, slightly flirting, and telling my friends the stories. I liked that they didn't know him: that he was mine alone, separate from the rest of my life. But the ambivalence I felt toward him was palpable. That's the crux I kept tripping over.

We leaned against my hutch (such a normal position for a bored worker). It was before the dinner rush and we'd just finished discussing how we hoped the line would be gone by seven-thirty: a normal conversation at the beginning of the afternoon shift. Seven-thirty was exactly an hour before close and the time of our last break of the evening. If the line was gone by then, our tables would have plenty of time to eat and be gone by

time we closed, and the hope was that we'd have an empty section ready for cleaning by closing. In a perfect world it would happen.

"How's the boyfriend?" he asked. He'd ask every now and then. He probably wanted me to tell him how awful my boyfriend was so he'd have the opportunity to 'sweep me off my feet'.

"Oh, we broke up." My first boyfriend and I had fun. He kind of came out of nowhere and I honestly was just enjoying hanging out with him and then I started to like him and he liked me, but it kind of went downhill from there, honestly. And that's a completely different story. Suffice it to say that even though he never met Donald, he didn't like him, and my immature eighteen-year-old self liked that Donald made him a bit jealous, and well, vice versa.

"What?" His grin was undeniable. "When?"

"A couple months ago."

"You never told me." I wanted to wipe the Grinch-esque grin off his face. You just don't grin about something like that.

"Didn't seem important."

"This is fantastic. Didn't I always tell you I could see the future? You and me, we're meant to be."

"You have a girlfriend," I said. I wanted to punch him for her. I really did. He'd recently met a girl that lived in Chicago. For a good year or so people joked that she didn't exist. Such persistent attention from a guy was not something I was used to, especially from someone who had a girlfriend already. It made me feel like "the other woman" when I wasn't even doing anything. For four years a fear hung over my head that this mysterious woman from Chicago would come down and yell at me for something I didn't even do.

"Right now, but I can see the future, remember?"

“Donald, you’re like five years older than me.”

“And your point is?”

“It’s, I don’t know, weird.”

When you’re nineteen and a guy that is twenty-four is hitting on you, it’s a little strange, for me it was anyway, but the more I got to know Donald, the more it didn’t seem that big of a deal. I was more mature and he was less mature, so I guess it evened out.

“Will you help me clean the rest of my tables?” he asked from across the room. I was a pro at clean-up by this point, swift, fast, and with a rhythm.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You can do it yourself.” I packed up my things and prepared to leave.

“But Victoria,” he said, elongating the syllables. That was when I found him most annoying—when he acted as if he couldn’t do things himself, whether kidding or not. It wasn’t that I was against helping him, but he didn’t legitimately need my help.

Year 3

Donald became my safe space at Gray’s. He kept me entertained, sane, and laughing. Whenever I was cleaning a table or talking to someone, he’d come up behind me and poke me in this spot under my shoulder blade that made me cringe. Or he’d put his arm around me and tell whomever I was talking to that I was his girlfriend, especially if I was talking to another guy.

Whenever I came into work, I’d look for him, and I’d often find him standing with his

hands in his pockets in the opening to the New Room, which wasn’t even the newest addition to the restaurant. He’d smile at me and wave, and I’d smile back, happy I had someone to smile at.

But all the while he was dating the illuminous Chicago girl, and it didn’t sit well with me.

“I’m going to move a little bit away from you,” Donald said. “Jackson is watching.” Jackson’s family owned the restaurant. My cousin married him. He’d told Donald that he had his eye on him. Donald had a sort of reputation for flirting with girls (obviously), and I guess Jackson saw it as his duty to make sure Donald didn’t get too close to me. I laughed and shook my head, enjoying his fear of my cousin-in-law.

“Seriously. He scares me.” After a pause he said, “So you’ve got a boyfriend now?”

“Sort of. I’ve known him since high school.” All of my relationships at that point had been long distance, which in hindsight, I’m grateful for. To quote myself, I once said about this relationship that it

was like I was single, but not. I kind of liked it that way—then, anyway.

“You think you’re going to marry him?”

“I don’t know.” I knew I wasn’t, but sometimes you just don’t admit it to yourself. Hindsight. Really a beauty.

“Well, you’re not. It’s you and me, future wife.”

“If you say so.” Nonchalance epitomized my outward attitude toward Donald. Arguing never got me anywhere, so I just passively accepted whatever he said. Donald would say something he’d said so many times before and instead of completely shrugging him off, I’d kind of play with it, be ambiguous, or pretend not to show any

## Donald became my safe space at Gray’s.

interest. Maybe that was wrong—I don't know.

"So you admit it," he said. I could hear the smile in his voice. I tried not to make eye contact because I knew I'd smile back. I shook my head and laughed, knowing no response would shut him up.

"Why don't you think we'll work?" he asked.

"You don't even really know anything about me, Donald," I said.

"Sure I do. I know you're beautiful, funny, and amazing." He said it as if it were all that mattered. It wasn't. "Besides, you're the Lois Lane to my Superman."

"I don't like Superman." I couldn't help but laugh at his shocked expression.

I can't say I didn't enjoy the attention. It was like I had another life at work. One no one else really knew about. Sure I'd tell stories about Donald, but it was understood nothing would ever happen between us. My friends would say, Oh that Donald. He's so ridiculous. My mom would ask if I had any more Donald stories. That's what he was in the end: a mess of stories.

#### Year 4

We stood in a doorway, watching customers come through the line and find a table. Donald put his arm around my shoulders. I didn't shrug it off as I used to. It was just an arm. He'd just finished some spiel about how perfect we were for each other: books, nerdy stuff, and well, we just *were* of course.

I found out Donald told someone he'd leave his girlfriend for me, but I didn't want that. I never wanted to be the "other," the one who ruined everything, the one who stole someone's boyfriend. It doesn't always work out like it does in the movies.

"Oh, Victoria," he said. "When will you realize we're perfect for each other?"

"You have a girlfriend," I said. The same old tune was getting, well, old. "I don't like you flirting with me when you have a girlfriend. It makes me uncomfortable." What I'd wanted to say for years finally came out. Actually, I alluded to it at work, but couldn't quite form the words, so I sent him a Facebook message (classy). After that, he was cold and didn't say anything to me.

"Donald, did you hear about the Doctor Who 50th anniversary?" A shrug.

"Donald, your table wants regular coffee." No eye contact.

The next week, he walked by me singing "Heartbreaker" by Pat Benetar. My jaw dropped. Both relationships I'd had, they'd kind of ended up mutual in the end, so I'd never left someone heartbroken. It felt like that time I sprinkled salt on a slug and ran immediately away because I felt like the worst person in the world.

When I finally found a free moment, I apologized—for what, I wasn't quite sure, but I apologized anyway. The restaurant bustled with customers wanting coffee refills and complaining about the temperature of their food.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," I said. I really couldn't even figure out how what I said was so wrong or even why I finally said it. We weren't anything. We were barely friends.

This moment I remember perfectly: I stood over a round table by one of the big windows, cleaning. He stood on the other side, holding a tray full of dirty dishes. His voice quivered as he spoke. He didn't make eye contact. I knew he was being sincere, speaking from the heart. No one, not even the guys I'd dated, had expressed their affection for me with such emotion before.

"I meant everything I ever said," he said. "You're a great girl. You're, like, what every guy

dreams of as the perfect wife.”

I stared back at him in shock. I didn’t know what to say. Obviously not every guy would think that, and I wouldn’t want them to. So I just looked at him. His voice cracked.

“I can’t believe I’m telling you all this. But I really do like you. I always have. I’m sorry.” He walked away, speeding toward the dish room. I stood dumbfounded with customers staring at me.

When I finally found the time to talk to him, he was cleaning one of his tables, which was the perfect time to talk to someone when it was busy. I took a deep breath, with my heart nearing my throat, and said, “You know, Donald, maybe it would’ve worked in another life.”

That’s when I said it. That mostly empty, but heartfelt phrase. Did I mean it? Partly, but at the end of the day, we were different. Our lives were on different paths.

“You’ll always be the one that got away,” he said.

I liked that. I liked being the one that got away—the one that was unattainable. Being that to someone felt significant.

Year 5

“So you’re really doing it this time,” I said. After talking about moving to Chicago for months, Donald said he finally was.

“In a couple weeks.”

“It won’t be the same without you. Who will I talk to about Doctor Who?”

“I’ll miss you too, Victoria.”

One of the last things I remember before he left is this: I was working on pies, where you cut pie all night and dish it up all nice and pretty on

plates. I was pretty good. I could even cut a mean strawberry pie, which was a beast to cut. It was just before close. Only a few people made up the line and I was trying to get a head start on clean up. Donald stood next to me, saying something he usually said about our eventual marriage, when a guy came in and started getting his tray and silverware.

“You guys are perfect for each other,” he said.

“We’re not together,” I said. Smiling and feeling awkward. Always smiling though. It was my downfall with Donald. My inner emotions coming out when I least wanted them to.

“I know we are,” Donald said. “She won’t admit it.” His grin was ear to ear like the Cheshire Cat.

**“You know, Donald,  
maybe it would’ve  
worked in another life.”**

The man looked at me and said, “She likes you. I can tell.”

When he got down the line, Donald bounced over to me. “See! I told you. Even he can see it.” I don’t remember what I said. I probably told him every-

thing I usually told him, waved him off. He was being ridiculous. He had a girlfriend. Etc. etc. But I did feel something. I really did. A leap, a butterfly in my stomach at the man’s words. At Donald’s words or his smile or the times he’d put his arm around me.

A couple weeks later, he left and didn’t say goodbye. He said he would, but he didn’t.

Year 6

I left the cafeteria too, but after a year of volunteering abroad I came back, something I said I’d never do, but I was going to get my master’s degree, also something I said I’d never do, and I needed a job. Many people were new and most-

ly high schoolers. I wondered if I was like them at their age. I had a pretty good idea that I most definitely was not. I held no hope of remembering their names. I'd always been awful with names.

Everyone had their own people to talk to. I stood near them, sat next to them, but rarely joined in the conversations. I knew people and was still known as a veteran, but we weren't close. I was there to work. I stuck to myself even more than before.

I went back to my section in the New Room, leaned against my hutch, and observed the room and the subtle changes that had occurred since I'd left. I looked out the window and remembered the night Donald and I watched a bird peck at the window all evening.

"I think he comes every year," Donald said. The bird kept tapping at the window, fluttering up and down.

"I feel sorry for the little guy," I said.

"He'll figure it out eventually."

I never thought I'd miss the hidden straw wrappers, random pokes in my back that made me jump, and having someone to lean against the hutch with.

But I did. I do.

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