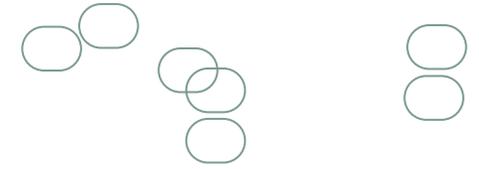


**COUNTER
INTELLIGENCE**

**CANDACY
A. TAYLOR**



**“I feel like I’m in control
of that situation, whatever it is.
If I don’t like ’em, I don’t wait on ’em.”**

Career waitress, Nevada casino¹

The waitress’s ear-piercing twang, mixed with the reverberating ring of the kitchen’s bell, creates the atmosphere that diners have marketed for decades. Grease carries the burnt smell of the range, while the aroma of frying bacon permeates the senses. You know breakfast is cooking when you hear the hollow crash of the frying pan hit the grill. The smells of bacon grease and watered-down coffee, mixed with blueberry pancakes, curdled fat, and fried starch, drift in the air. It’s not just the odors but the cacophony of clanging silverware against thick glass cream-colored plates laid over the chatter of patrons—all mixes in like a syncopated jazz riff. This environment with legs, mouths, arms, eyes, hands, and the silent breeze of Esther rushing by stirs up to a breakneck pace in a centrifugal spin. All managed and controlled by the well-seasoned waitress who raced to our tables, quarreled with the grill guy, and brought humor and culture to the American roadside dining experience.

The reward for managing chaos is the tip. But what is this tip for? It’s not merely that she took your order and brought your food. It’s for the mental and physical labor it takes to be a waitress, the stamina required to stay in the same restaurant for decades at a time, and the ability to remember ten things at once while being hassled for a date. Structure is what these women excel at—organizing their tables, customers, the grill guy, and the kitchen. Independence steps forward as she lays down the check, says “thanks,” and walks away. In that moment Susan isn’t asking you for a little extra change. After she’s claimed her space and controlled it, she’s demanding that you recognize her multitude of tasks and that you do the right thing.

Successful waitresses are independent, focused, and self-sufficient workers who manage not only their space, but time, money, and people. Although waitressing doesn't require any book-learned skills, it does require a certain personality type and an intuitive people sense that cannot be learned. Yet, somehow, waitressing falls under the category of a skill-less job. Other female-identified work, like housework, knitting, sewing, etc., is also dismissed in terms of money or appreciation. Most "women's work" shares common traits like organization, thinking ahead (reading minds if possible), and physical labor (waitressing and housework). You have to be highly organized to be a waitress or to run a house, otherwise you will run yourself ragged. A sense of pride surfaces when one is successful at this job because it's easy to fall behind and get slammed. There's power in knowing that not just anyone could walk in and take over your tables. To make it look easy is the trick men have been falling for, for decades. To not look harried and stressed out. To walk to the back room and fall apart, and come out with dry eyes and a smile, is where the fine line between trickery and the truth lies.



Susan referred to herself as a "counter whore," as she chuckled at the irony of table-serving me finger foods during our interview. She had long sienna-colored hair and warm yet piercing eyes that glimmered with a tint of wickedness. I sensed that her endearing, captivating personality made her an excellent waitress who had no problems getting exactly what she wanted. Even though her hair wasn't swirled into a beehive, it was obvious to me where she stored her wise-cracks: in her razor-sharp memory—no bobby pins were necessary.

Susan gets her pride and her laundry list of skills from being born into a family of waitresses. The Brandons consist of three generations of food slingers: Virginia (the grandmother), her daughters Lindsay and Susan, and Virginia's granddaughters Nicole and Brit. The whole crew, with the exception of Lindsay, works at the Rainbow Casino coffee shop in Henderson, Nevada. Susan covers the day shift, Virginia shows up for the swing, and Brit patrols the graveyard. (Nicole fills in at random.) It works out that there's a Brandon at the Rainbow 24/7.

In most casinos, the coffee shops look more traditional with fluorescent lighting and hard linoleum floors. The Rainbow, however, brought the casino *into* the coffee shop. It's dark with mirrored ceilings and walls; black vinyl booths line the edges of the room and high-backed cushioned stools swivel along the counter. Studded lights travel in angular patterns along the ceiling with purple and aqua neon tubing. The floor in the counter area is the only section that's not carpeted with shapeless splotches of purple, maroon, and sea-green highlights. The square



THE BRANDONS: SUSAN, BRIT, VIRGINIA, AND NICOLE DRESSED FOR WORK



SUSAN'S COUNTER AT THE RAINBOW

mirrors laid in patterned succession surround the room, creating a bewildering, haunting sense of doomed repetition. Reality is suddenly fragmented, carrying with it an aura of loss that rings true for almost any gambling addict, but for the Brandons this strange visual affliction—magnified and multiplied by mirrors—signifies more: more work, more customers, and more money.

LOOKING BACK

Counter spaces have a rich history that started in diners on the East Coast. In Massachusetts, diners originally roamed the streets as lunch wagons in the late nineteenth century.² They were strategically located across from factories to serve blue-collar men during their breaks and after long, exhausting days at work. Before there was any seating available, all food transactions were conducted through a window and guys ate standing up outside in all types of weather. Up until the 1920s the clientele was entirely male (including the servers). This is one of many reasons that most women wanted nothing to do with these rowdy roadside haunts.

These eateries were based in functionality, not comfort. But with the extreme weather conditions back East, diner manufacturers needed to create an interior space for patrons to congregate in. The most cost-efficient and space-saving solution was to install counters lined with stools. Soon after that, style and comfort became a determining factor that was influenced by the look and style of the day. In an attempt to increase their sales, diners tried to lure women inside by setting out props like baby carriages and flower boxes and hanging signs announcing “Ladies Invited.”³ Still women avoided these rough, boisterous establishments partly because the small, hard wooden stools that lined the counter were extremely uncomfortable. As a result, some manufacturers started to design diners with tables and booths. The idea of having women come in to eat in diners stirred up a hot debate between diner operators. *Dining Car News*, a magazine started by Jerry O’Mahony (also a diner manufacturer), featured this debate of creating a female-friendly environment.⁴ Some operators complained that women sat too long because they ate too slowly and the patrons felt that the women were moving in on their territory. Until World War II it was not unusual to see diners segregated by gender. The Flying Yankee Dining Car in Pennsylvania, for example, sat women only in the basement.⁵

During World War II women were recruited to do everything from sewing uniforms to welding war equipment, and diners saw an opportunity to enlist them for their own purposes. They figured that women were more responsible, they didn’t stay up all night drinking like men did, and more importantly, operators could pay them almost half the wages and yield twice the amount of work. From that moment on, waitresses have dominated the diner scene, but not in the way operators

had intended. These women were assumed to be docile, kind, and obedient. While there were those who fit into that stereotype, by the 1960s some of these women were running the show. They had boundaries and rules about how much nonsense they would deal with. In larger cities waitresses formed unions and fought for their rights while others just used their unswerving defiant will and refused to be treated like a servant.

On the West Coast, there are still a few old-school diners with the railroad dining car architecture that were established in the late 1940s. But even as the West Coast eateries morphed and sprouted into space-age Googie architecture-inspired buildings with cantilevered roofs, large glass-paneled facades, and outrageous sign pylons, the stool-adorned counter space continued to claim its position in terms of both function and style—just as it had in the beginning.

Ironically, the very space that women avoided, the infamous counter space, proved to be the most lucrative and powerful space for them to rule. According to Susan, if she’s “on counters” she’s guaranteed a hundred customers on her day shift, compared to the back area (table service) where waitresses average only sixty. This is generally where the regulars congregate, tip well, and leave. The constant turnover of this section gives the waitress a clear advantage over other sections where people “camp out” and sometimes stay for hours. Historically, waitresses working on counters made deep connections with their stool-perched regulars and formed meaningful, lasting relationships. Doug came to sit at the same stool every day to read his paper, and without skipping a beat, Shirley knew exactly how he liked his coffee, eggs, and toast.⁶ To him, she became indispensable. To her, he became an almost effortless part of her routine. His order was etched onto her memory as permanently as the faded sailor tattoo he had done overseas. As management observed this win-win situation, they realized that if they ever fired her, they would lose some of their best regulars. Suddenly she had the upper hand.

thE POWER OF CONVENIENCE

Lyn Wright works at Peggy Sue’s Nifty Fifties Diner in Newberry Springs, California, located about fifteen minutes from the infamous Bagdad Café. Both places sit smack in the middle of nowhere. Despite Peggy Sue’s remoteness, this roadside restaurant is loaded with travelers because it’s strategically placed between the bustling hubs of L.A. and Las Vegas. Years ago Lyn waited at the Bagdad. But she “makes a lot of money”⁷ working at Peggy Sue’s—especially on counters. In the doorway that separates the front counter section and the back table area hangs a handwritten sign: We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone—Regardless of who you are, who you think you are, who your daddy is, or how much money you make!!



A TYPICAL DINER COUNTER

Lyn sat in a booth wearing a warm yet serious expression, with her long blonde hair accented with her bright baby blue eye shadow. After briefly discussing her battle with breast cancer (she's been in remission for a few years now), I took her seriously when she said that the counter was *her* space. Before her swing shift the other waitresses make sure it's cleaned up to suit her high standards, and then they clear out. This idea of claiming ownership of these workspaces is not at all surprising when you consider the money that can be made. Usually the counter area is sectioned off and separated from the general dining room area—functioning as a world unto itself, creating invisible mental and physical boundaries. These boundaries become places that are patrolled, observed, and protected.

On counters, a waitress can control and maintain her area with less effort—ultimately becoming more efficient.⁸ When Susan is serving the counter area, her movements are more precise and she's able to observe a larger area by scanning with her eyes rather than having to walk as much, than if she were table serving. The regulars hang out on their favorite stools and Lyn has everything she needs right at her fingertips, allowing her to handle more customers. The coffee, soups, condiments, shakes, the kitchen window, desserts, etc., are only a few steps away so her proficiency cannot be matched. And since the stools position the patrons facing the waitress at a higher elevation than if they were sitting at a table, their relationship and connection is stronger and strengthens over the years. Usually regulars come in by themselves and are not lost in conversation with dining mates (this is a situation where customers sometimes don't even know what their waitress looks like). The counter patrons tend to have more respect, because they see her *working*, and if they need something they feel confident that she won't miss them because they're *sitting right in front of her*. In some diners, it takes years to have the counter as your primary workstation. This is where the hierarchy exists among waitresses. Newcomers are usually forced to work slower stations and have to take tables with patrons who have a history of tipping poorly or in some cases are notorious for not tipping at all. Long-standing waitresses are given a great deal of slack by management when it comes to customer complaints or mistakes in their paperwork. By the time she's reached "counters" she's formed a network of support on both sides from management and her regulars, leaving her more time to refine the personal details in her service that her customers have come to depend on.

Waitresses walk hundreds of miles in very small spaces (similar to mice), back and forth, around and around, day in and day out. How does this affect the psychology of what they're doing? This is similar to the housewife who obsessively combs the inside of her house for dirt, only to have it creep up minutes after she's cleaned. To be tied into a space, to monitor it, obsess over the people in it, and then out in the world, to have her work devalued and disrespected is one of the common tragedies of women and their work.

There are benefits of being tied into a space, especially if you're controlling it. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault introduces the concept of the panopticon⁹ as a way to analyze how power is achieved through institutions in modern society. For Foucault, the panopticon is an instrument of power that holds its subjects under an absolute gaze. In the eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham designed a prison that houses a round tower elevated in the center of the room lined with prisoners in cages. The panopticon is designed to produce the feeling of one always being under surveillance even if the guard is facing the other direction. Foucault theorizes that being strategically positioned in a place where one can keep a "panoptic" eye over a large group of people is the most superior, powerful position one can achieve. Since the eighteenth century, this concept has been carried over and used in schools, factories, hospitals, and most recently through satellite technologies. By comparing two waitresses working in different sections of the diner, we can begin to understand how the layout of counters found in diners can be conceived in panoptic terms giving counter waitresses an advantage over table servers.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault says, "each gaze would form a part of the overall functioning of power."¹⁰ Standing in *one* spot, Susan's "network of gazes"¹¹ draws geometric patterns throughout her section. Zooming in on Bill, she sees the check she dropped five minutes ago, but she knows he will sit there until he finishes the sports page. Continuing on, her vision, drawing invisible lasers, shoots over to Dan, who won't touch his eggs until she drops off the hot sauce. As she turns to look at the kitchen window behind her, while making a quick sweep along the entire counter, she sees that Ted's food is up. These are important clues that she can visually collect about her section that mean nothing to the ignorant observer. This sets her apart from anyone else who dares to enter and attempt to take over. In that moment, even her manager is at a loss without Susan's valuable information.

Without knowing it, counter waitresses have used the tools reserved for large institutions, prisons, schools, hospitals, etc., to dominate and control masses of people. The space of a coffee shop isn't recognized as an institution, but zooming out of the diner and looking at the institution of the restaurant *industry* offers a similar perspective. Suddenly, the customer is something to be processed and turned for a profit. And even though Susan's best intentions are to provide personalized, efficient service, in this case she's functioning as a mechanism and the counter acting as an instrument.

To Foucault, Susan's operating in the ideal apparatus because she can see her whole section by standing in a fixed position. The newcomer, Tanya,¹² on the other hand, has to walk across the entire restaurant, walking *and* looking. It's not okay for her to stand in the middle of the dining room and perform the same act of looking as Susan just did at the counter. There's an unspoken rule that people need to move through the dining room of the restaurant, so bussers and other

waitresses can get down the aisles. The dining room functions much like a real traffic situation: Unless you're at a stop sign you must keep moving. Tanya's stop signs are in the kitchen, at the counter when she's picking up drinks, and at her tables. Unlike Susan, she's forced to rely on her memory and her legs to gather information.

In Bentham's panopticon, the prisoners are shut in a cell and observed by a supervisor in a central tower. His prisoners are seen but not able to see: functioning as "the object of information."¹³ And although Susan's patrons are not prisoners, they are however fixed in a position and therefore constantly visible. Hierarchy is established through the maximum amount of vision that can be gathered in the shortest amount of time. In the diner, the counter acts as an instrument of power, elevating Susan's status over Tanya's. It's not just that Susan's serving up to forty more people, it's the ease with which she's able to perform what Tanya would find impossible. Not because she's a bad waitress, but in view of how her section is laid out: grounded in movement down the aisles, whereas Susan's is positioned above, able to hover with a privileged bird's-eye view.

It's ironic that Susan, who *technically* is a servant in this institution, is in the position of the tower guard, allowing her to subvert the structure for her own means, carving out a space of power for herself.

For waitresses who are stuck serving in inefficient stations, there are both physical and psychological consequences. Serving tables located on the other side of the restaurant (the farthest from the drink stations and the kitchen), a waitress will walk up to an extra twenty paces per trip to her section. After an eight- to ten-hour shift, she has literally walked a few more *miles* than the waitress working on counters; and during those extra miles she's balanced large heavy plates, and gingerly carried hundreds of drinks, increasing the opportunity for accidents. The consequences of making mistakes, either with the order or requests for specific condiments, utensils, or the bill, weigh heavier when she's working in an inconvenient station. Counter servers barely have to walk any paces to their customers. Usually this area is so small, they just turn around to the kitchen window, grab the food, and place it in front of the customer. A common complaint of servers is when they'll stand in front of a large table, ask *everyone* there if they would like refills on their drinks, and only *one* person will say yes. After walking across the restaurant, ordering the drink, walking to the drink station, making it herself, walking back to the table, and then setting down the drink, someone else will pipe up, "Oh, could I have a refill?" She goes back, performs the same process, comes back to the table, only to be sent away again for another drink order. It's no wonder that Susan feels more competent and experienced when working on counters. The psychological satisfaction of getting so much done with half the effort empowers her; she knows that she can catch all the curve balls thrown her way. Susan loves working counters so much that even on her days off, if there's a counter shift available, she'll work it.



There are some coffee shops that don't have counter spaces, but you can be sure that the well-seasoned waitress usually has a distinctive area that marks her territory. Esther Paul, age seventy-seven, has been working at Sharkey's Casino coffee shop since 1969. She's been there longer than any of the other waitresses.¹⁴ Aside from waitressing, Esther paints and designs hooked rugs, and you can see her largest example hanging behind her coffee station at work. (See illustration, p. 129.) The clown theme was Sharkey's idea, but the rest of it is all Esther. Of all the places I visited on my travels, I have never seen such a striking declaration of someone's workspace. Of course the average customer would have no idea that this was Esther's handiwork, but her regulars know and respect her even more for it.

beING IN CONTROL

Once a waitress has claimed her territory, it's usually occupied by her regulars who like the way she runs it. Women who have been around for decades usually work the most lucrative stations and have the most "call parties" (patrons who come in and will only sit in their stations). On occasion, Susan will have her section filled with call parties and other waitresses' sections will be taken over with customers who only want Susan to wait on them. This of course causes problems among the servers, especially when the manager sides with satisfying the patrons. To be fair, Susan will offer her new tables (those that aren't call parties) to servers who have lost their tables to her fan club. Due to this and other reasons, being a newcomer (waitressing at a place for five years or less) can act as a significant disadvantage in terms of both money and respect. This is one reason why career waitresses stay at the same restaurant for as long as they can.

Longevity not only gives her an advantage over the customers, but over management as well. Management never pays much more than minimum wage, so even career waitresses depend largely on their tips—not on their paychecks. By the time all of the deductions are made for social security, various insurance payments, and taxes on her adjusted tips (the government gets 8 percent of 15 percent of the total sales), there is barely anything left of her paycheck. "[A] waitress that pulls in \$60 to \$120 a day in tips may receive a paycheck for less than \$10, or even for zero dollars, showing the appropriate deductions."¹⁵ This creates an interesting relationship between the waitress/manager/regular, diffusing the power dynamic between manager and servant. Instead of working for management, a waitress focuses her energies on making the

CASINO
VIA



ESTHER'S WORKSTATION AT
SHARKEY'S CASINO IN
GARDNERVILLE, NEVADA

regulars happy because it's her regulars that show their appreciation in the form of tips, loyalty, and respect. Some of Virginia Brandon's (Susan's mom's) customers have been sitting with her for up to *forty* years. Over the years, her regulars' kids have become her bussers and when their grandkids come in she knows exactly who they are. In fact, Esther, who's been waitressing for fifty years, says, "I have people where I've waited on them, and then their kids, and their grandkids. And anytime people come in with little kids they always put them into my station, because the other girl (who's younger) [says] 'Aww, I don't want to wait on those little brats!' Well, those little brats are going to be your customers of tomorrow and the people remember that."¹⁶

Restaurant managers do not hold the same amount of power as office, factory, or retail managers. Susan says, "... a waitress would probably be the best manager inside a restaurant because she knows what's going on."¹⁷ Susan's sister, Lindsay, reassures us that she makes about \$40,000 while the managers in her restaurant make only \$26,000 so ultimately, "it doesn't pay to be manager."¹⁸ From the waitresses' perspective, management seems to be an unrewarding position that offers little more than grief from fussy patrons, and a staff that disregards their position as one of power. Part of the reason that waitresses don't take management too seriously is because of the high turnover rate. According to Virginia, managers switch around from property to property (the Rainbow is a huge conglomerate that owns several restaurants); they come in and "want to change everything and we've been there a hell of a lot longer than they have."¹⁹ For a while there was a new manager every six months. "We wouldn't even bother learning their names because we knew ... [they wouldn't stick around]," stated another waitress.²⁰ When I asked Virginia why there was such a high turnover, she said, "I think some of them are intimidated to be working with older women and teenagers. [At our place] there's no middle gap, there's these old women, set in their ways, and these kids that don't want to do anything."²¹ The whole concept of manager seems flipped when you have a workforce that ends up training their "superiors" about the specific needs of the locals, the presentation of the meals, and other issues that are unique to that restaurant.

Waitresses, especially the ones who have been around, look out for each other and form a united front that rarely includes management. Some waitresses spoke of managers who "hate each other," while the other waitresses considered their co-servers as "family." At different restaurants, management duties can range from running a waitress's food when she's too slammed to sitting in the back watching TV while they do paperwork. But waitresses tend to have the upper hand in terms of being organized in a system that leaves them to depend on each other's help. Fernanda Osborn, a second-generation Harvey Girl, said that after working seven years at the Caverns, management decided to start making the servers use trays (a new technique to learn), and everybody threatened to quit, so "they did away with that idea."²²

Since the Brandons work in a union house, they have even more control. If there are no customers in the restaurant at 9:00 pm and their shift isn't over until 10:45, the manager can't send them home. They have to pay their wait staff until the end of the shift. In another union house, one waitress confirmed, "Sometimes we'll get mad at the manager and we'll say, 'we're not doin' nothin', and we'll all stay there [until the end] ... That's that power thing, you know, they [managers] don't really have any control." In fact, one waitress freely stated, "When I go to the table I feel like I've got power, I could feed them poison if I wanted to. For at least twenty to twenty-five minutes, I feel I'm in control of that situation—whatever it is."

Another example of waitresses laying down the law in restaurants is evident when they refuse service based on whether they like a table, or if a customer has come in before and not tipped adequately. "If I don't like them, I don't wait on them," says one waitress. In these situations, it becomes the manager's responsibility to take care of the situation. They either have to find a newcomer to take the table, or they might even pick it up themselves—all in the effort to keep things running smoothly. This is supported in *Dishing It Out* when Paules states, "The waitress who seeks to increase her tip income by maximizing the number of customers she serves may endeavor to cut her losses by refusing to serve parties that have stiffed her in the past. If she is a low-ranking waitress, her refusal is likely to be overturned by the manager. If she is an experienced and valuable waitress, the manager may ask someone to take the party, assure the waitress that he will take care of her (that is, pad the bill and give her the difference), or even pick up the party himself."²³

In an attempt to control the power dynamics in the restaurant, some managers will forbid the wait staff to tip the cooks. Through the power of money, the waitress can have the cooks *working for her* by supplying her customers with larger portions. "I'll slip a single cook a five," one waitress admitted, and over the years, this can only work in her favor at the cost of the restaurant, and the managers know this, but they really have no way of controlling it. It's the smaller, old-time establishments that still use "the wheel" instead of computers for order taking where this is a regular occurrence. Without computers, there's no way to keep track of inventory—giving the waitresses yet another opportunity to ask for "extras" to give to their favorite customers. In fact, some waitresses admitted to me that they "play dumb" by insisting that they "can't run a computer," so through a condescending attitude of thinking that these women are too ignorant to learn, management keeps using the wheel. This is why some waitresses refer to their managers as "idiots who can't do their jobs," and generally don't respect their position.

The waitress is not only positioned physically in a place that gives her power, she also has staff members working for her, people that she's "paying out," to help her give the best service she can. At the Rainbow each waitress has her own bus person, as opposed to other places where one

busser will serve up to four waitresses. In either case, having someone run your waters, clear your tables, and generally pick up the slack allows her to have more physical and mental control over her space. If the busser isn't there when she needs them, she shorts them on her tip out.

Bussers can get up to 20 percent of the waitress's tips, but at the end of the shift, that's up to her. "If my bus kid sucks, he ain't gonna get nothin'," Susan promised.²⁴ But most of the time waitresses are more than fair and end up over-tipping the busser because they understand how hard the work really is. So not only does she have the busser in her corner, but also the cooks, the hostess (who also gets tipped out by the waitress), and in most circumstances, the manager. The tension that is sometimes created between servers and management is partially due to these forces that manifest both psychologically and physically. Whether the waitress is conscious of this or not, Paul Brandon, Virginia's son and a former restaurant manager, is when he says, "Oscar (the Rainbow's general manager) wants Mom to be a manager, she says no way, but yet she manages the damn place anyway ... it's nothing against the managers."²⁵

Money can be a trigger for anybody, and the fact that waitresses carry large sums of it around is too much for some restaurants to handle. It's called "running your own cash." Some restaurants operate under a general cash system where the customer takes the money up to the cashier/hostess on their way out. Management would prefer that the waitress not offer to take the check up for them. "There's too much of it [money] going around,"²⁶ and they feel as though they can't control it, if it passes through the server's hands. If a customer walks out or "dined and dashed," under the old Nevada law, they used to make the waitress pay for it out of her tips. This no longer happens since the union went to battle to protect the waitress.

Other unfair practices continue to happen in restaurants, and if you're new, some places will take full advantage. At the Rainbow, a manager asked Susan, "Where's the check [for an unspecified table]?" She answered, "I don't know, why would I know? When was it?" "Well, it was three days ago." Susan says, "Well, you better check again" (laughing).²⁷ But the management will mess with the new girls and they end up *paying* the bill out of their tips and Susan will approach the newcomer demanding to know, "Why did you pay the bill?" and the waitress will say, "Well, they said that I had to." Susan assures them, "That's your first mistake, sweetheart, they don't *make* you do anything. You have any questions whatsoever, you come ask me."²⁸

If management comes down too hard on their staff, there's usually a consequence. In almost every restaurant waitresses have been known to "walk out" during a shift, either as a group or alone. This is where some of the newcomers can hold their own, since minimum wage waiting jobs are not hard to come by. If she walks out, she can be waiting somewhere else within a day or two. So if she feels too disrespected, or irritated by the way things are run in her restaurant, she can simply and dramatically walk out during a shift, leaving the manager to fill in and take



A REGULAR AT THE COUNTER

up the slack. And this is just one of many disadvantages of being a manager. Restaurants run like well-oiled machines with all the necessary parts hard at work, so when one gear is missing the whole system suffers. It's the manager's job to lubricate the system by keeping the staff content enough not to organize a walkout. If the grill breaks, it's the manager who crawls on the floor looking for pieces of broken equipment. If the dishwasher storms out in protest, managers can't take a prep cook or a busser off their duties to help out. Instead they have to unbutton their shirts and roll up their sleeves and get *their* hands scorched in bacteria-killing solutions.²⁹ The tenuous and precarious nature of the business is something that managers understand all too well. And for this reason, it's in their best interest to be on the side of the waitress.



These waitresses do more than just sling hash and make money; they get something else in return. There's an emotional satisfaction of being needed and "taking care of" someone that makes this more than just a service position. "Waiting" on someone and "taking care" of customers are interchangeable terms that waitresses use, and these terms subconsciously affect the agency of the work. It straddles the tenuous line between something you're *paid* to do and something that you *want* to do. This is where she can have control over how she treats you. You could just be another processed customer, or you could receive personalized attention that's reserved for her best-behaved patrons. These are the ones who come back not for the food, but for the service—confirming how important the particular style and personality of that waitress is. And she knows it.

Most of the waitresses I interviewed work in places that are run over with local patronage. Since 9/11 the restaurant industry has been hit hard with layoffs. This especially affected tourist-dependent hotel/casinos where the occupancy rate dropped below 80 percent. To help out, the Internal Revenue Service made a deal for the servers working in southern Nevada and cut their tip allocation in half for two months. So instead of paying out 8 percent of their income, they were only taxed for 4 percent. In the midst of being in a recession, one would assume that restaurants all over the country are suffering, but Virginia assured me that the recent events have not bothered her business a bit, because she has her locals. "Every day; same people every day. Thank God. So nobody got laid off, nobody got their hours cut and our business is as good as it ever was."³⁰

About one of every four of Virginia's tables is a call party and they will wait for as long as it takes to get their regular dose of Virginia's familiar warm sweet service (the bosses love that, because

while the customer's waiting, he/she is out in the casino gambling). When Virginia's regulars finally walk in, as they head towards their table, Virginia hangs their ticket on the wheel. By the time they sit down and have been served their drinks, she comes over with a plate of hot food. Her regulars depend on her so much that when she switched from the day shift to the swing shift (she worked days/counter section for thirteen years), they were confused and didn't even know how to order. When a new waitress waited on one of Virginia's regulars and said, "Whataya gonna have?" he said, "I don't know, where's Virginia? She always orders my food for me."

Susan, on the other hand, aka "Flo," is "mean as murder"³¹ according to her sister Lindsay. "Yeah, she's mean to them and they love it,"³² Brit chimed in. Not only is Susan mean to her customers, but ironically she's one of the top-grossing waitresses during her shift. This is the perfect example of the crotchety, "kiss my grits" attitude that not just anyone can pull off and use as a tool to stuff her apron with cash. Virginia was tickled by this scene the other day at work:

There were four guys at a table and she [Susan] walked by with her arms full of food. "I'll be right with ya." And the guy said, "Yeah." Next time she walked by—plate full of food. "Be right there guys." "Yeah, sure, we've heard that one." And then she finally went to the table and they said, "It's about time, you know what happens when an Irishman really gets mad?" Susan said, "Yeah, they turn into instant assholes." They laughed and, as usual, she got a great tip.³³

Nicole, Susan's daughter, told me that she could never get away with talking to customers like this. "That's my talent,"³⁴ Susan proudly admits. And every good waitress has at least one that makes her money.

"BURN AND TURN"

Handling the pace during a rush is something all of these women have mastered. "They (restaurants) want servers that can burn and turn."³⁵ Which basically means work as absolutely fast as you can and turn your tables (seat consecutive customers) to maximize profits. Upper management wants those customers back out in the casino gambling away all their possessions. Restaurants like these are designed for speed. Susan assured me, "You put your toast in the toaster, hang your check, and them eggs will be cooked before that toast pops up. I'm not exaggerating."³⁶ Virginia, age sixty-six, reconfirmed this when she said, "... from five to nine you've got a waiting line of an hour, and so you don't even breathe, you don't take a cigarette, you don't go to the bathroom, nothin'. Just run."³⁷



**VIRGINIA
BRANDON**



ESTHER PAUL



To the ignorant observer, the scene described above sounds torturous and exhausting but really, these women thrive on it. They love to be busy. The time flies by as their aprons fill up with small bills forming flattering bulges in places that would otherwise be undesired. And if everything goes off without a hitch, they feel even better about themselves because they've accomplished what most people would find impossible. During the day shift at the Rainbow, there are five girls and they split up the floor so they can increase their break time to fifty minutes. To do this each server has to manage *fifteen* tables while the other takes her extra-long break.³⁸ Susan assures me, "You've got to be good, you've got to be able to hang, you know. When we get some of those new ones [waitresses] in and you're splittin' that floor, I'm tellin' you right now, your head starts a-hurtin'—you're pickin' 'em up over here, and pickin' 'em up over there."³⁹ And this has nothing to do with management. The waitresses have set up this unbelievably demanding environment because they prefer it that way.

Esther, age seventy-seven, who reportedly "runs circles around the younger waitresses,"⁴⁰ uses the pace of waitressing to keep her body in shape, her spirits up, and her mind sharp. This is one of several reasons why retirement isn't an option. Virginia tried to retire when she was sixty-two. Her boss didn't want her to leave, so he suggested that she take a month off and then see how she felt. After about two weeks he called her and said, "So, how you doin'?" Virginia answered, "I'm ready to go back to work."

NOTES

- 1** The information in this chapter is derived from interviews with twenty-six waitresses aged twenty-one to seventy-seven. Most of the interviews were conducted either in their homes or at their workplace and lasted anywhere from two to four hours. Questionnaires were sent out a week prior to meetings, gearing them up for guided interviews about their relationship to their work. Ninety-five percent are over fifty years old and have waitressed for thirty to fifty years. All of these women work in coffee shops situated along interstates, inside casinos, and in small desert towns in the western United States. At the time of the interview all of the women were still working. Some quotes were purposely kept anonymous to protect the subject's right to speak freely.
- 2** A large part of this section is borrowed from Richard Gutman, *American Diner: Then and Now* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 84–91, and Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 26–58.
- 3** For more discussion about this, see Gutman, 84–6.
- 4** *Ibid.*, 86–91.
- 5** *Ibid.*, 91. Gutman cites “Do Women Take Longer to Eat Than Men Do?” *Dining Car News* (December 1927). Diner owner Henry Conture wrote that women were “as snappy as the men when it comes to eating in a Jerry O’Mahony Diner. The average man takes 10–13 minutes to eat a meal in a diner.” According to the figures kept at the Burlington, Vermont, diner, women did not spend any more time eating than men. Two hundred out of the 850 customers per day were women.
- 6** A composite of the waitress-customer relationship.
- 7** Lyn Wright, interview by author, November 4, 2001.
- 8** This discussion is true largely for diners and coffee shops. This is not generally true for sushi bars because the waitress is not in the position of the sushi chef; instead, she’s standing behind the customer. Although she can stand in one position at the end and survey the whole station, it’s not the most lucrative section in the restaurant.
- 9** Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 195–228.
- 10** *Ibid.*, 171.
- 11** *Ibid.*
- 12** A composite.
- 13** Foucault, 200.
- 14** Esther was one of the most courageous women I interviewed. She grew up on a farm in Illinois, and was taught not to question the authority of a man. Her husband of twenty-six years left her for a younger woman, after she put him through school with her tip money she made during the war. After he left she drove out West by herself and started a fiercely independent life that she continues to thrive in. At seventy-seven years of age, she cross-country skis and rows for forty minutes every day, walks to and from work, and runs circles around the younger waitresses.
- 15** Greta Foff Paules, *Dishing It Out* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 58.
- 16** Esther Paul, interview by author, November 14, 2001.
- 17** Susan Thurmod, interview by author, November 9, 2001.
- 18** For more discussion about the salary differences between servers and managers, see Paules, *Dishing It Out*, 200–1.
- 19** Virginia Brandon, interview by author, November 9, 2001.
- 20** These comments and others that follow are kept anonymous to protect the sources.
- 21** *Ibid.*
- 22** Fernanda Osborn, interview by author, November 6, 2001.
- 23** Paules, *Dishing It Out*, 31.
- 24** Thurmod, interview.
- 25** Paul Brandon, interview by author, November 9, 2001. Paul Brandon is Virginia Brandon’s son and a former restaurant manager.
- 26** *Ibid.*
- 27** Thurmod, interview.
- 28** *Ibid.*
- 29** For more information, see Paules, *Dishing It Out*, Chapter 3, “The Limits of Managerial Authority,” 49–75.
- 30** Virginia Brandon, interview.
- 31** Lindsay Brandon, interview by author, November 9, 2001.
- 32** Brit Meschnark, interview by author, November 9, 2001.
- 33** *Ibid.*
- 34** Thurmod, interview.
- 35** *Ibid.*
- 36** *Ibid.*
- 37** Virginia Brandon, interview.
- 38** This is quite extreme. Most waitresses have only five to seven tables at a time.
- 39** Thurmod, interview.
- 40** Mashelle, manager of Sharkey’s Casino in Gardnerville, Nevada, telephone interview by author, November 14, 2001.

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