

A Beautiful Purpose

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It is my job to wait in the back of the house for the doorbell to ring. When it does, I am to quickly—as much as the seven inches of stretch my black knee-length skirt allows, but not in a rush—as seemingly calm and delighted as a flight attendant—position myself just inside the front entryway as our guests figure out how to unlatch the fidgety old door, comment on the quaint appearance of the old house—“*the charming vines,*” and rub their mink coats up against one another as they realize how small old houses really are, which only adds to the charm. Then, depending on who they are, and who I am to them (another ornament of the place, in most cases) they look through me to see which tables are open and attempt to suggest one before I can.

If they are of high society they want to be in the front parlor room where no whispered conversations go unheard; those who know the chef and don't mind the yelling, because yelling is the sign of real food being prepared, sit just off the double doors of the kitchen; and those newly in love, not a first date, take a room to themselves upstairs—where they can be forgotten for a while.

Repeat diners to Giovanni's, an Italian sounding Hawaiian restaurant in the old district of cattle-town Billings, Montana, all say the same upon seeing my fresh young face: “Where's Marilla?” “Is Marilla in tonight?” “Can you tell Marilla we're here, daaawling.”

I am not Marilla. I am a poetic janitor, an archeologist, a modest contortionist. I am a twenty-something 5th grade teacher who just finished sanitizing twenty little desks, deciphering the mathematical hieroglyphics carved into paper by dull pencil nubs, and running around the bases of the kickball field in my Payless specials in the hopes of inspiring, Donald, my fifth grade genius to move his atrophying ten year old body.

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“Certainly. I will tell her you’re here. Could you remind me of your names again?”

I seat them and silently pour the water, the glass at a perfect forty-five degree angle, the flow a thin silk ribbon, just as Marilla does, allowing neither myself nor the water to glug or splash onto the faces of the diners now fully immersed in their menu reading experience.

The menus at Giovanni’s are exotic by Montana standards. Some diners sheepishly finish their complementary baguette and sushi and ask for their coats, apologetically explaining they assumed there would be pasta on the menu. But most customers simply trust the weekly whims of the head chef, Phil, (he did have his own cooking show a long time ago) and open their mouths wide to the salt-crusted sunfish and Greek-style grilled octopus and drink down those sake steamed mussels, not even swallowing before asking for more. If a plate of coral and fried spam is placed in front of you at Giovanni’s, you eat it.

As hostess, I have performed my ritual: the scene is set for the dramatic acts that are to unfold. It is time for me to notify Marilla of her first table for the evening. If the customers are unfashionably early, say five o’clock, she is upstairs in the bordello-red bathroom washing up from wherever she had just come.

If I press my ear up against the door of the bathroom I can hear her taking pieces of the day off of her skin. Closing my eyes I can see her hands thrusting into the torrent of water, the pipes clanking desperately to provide more. In those few moments, she transitions from one life to the next.

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“Marilla,” I interrupt, “you’ve got the Rasmussen’s for two downstairs.” There is a pause as the water shuts off and no response, as usual.

She emerges and the sun from the stairwell window casts a ray on her, revealing not a waitress, but a warrior goddess. Her eyes are fierce and sapphire blue, her skin is the constant tan of an outdoorsman who spends long days chopping, stalking, and digging, her biceps so thick and toned they gleam like loaves of egg-washed challah, her hands the kind that rein in a stampede of horses. She stands under me seven inches at five feet and yet, it is I looking up to her. Her wiry gray strands woven into a smooth braid, she brushes past me and begins her seven-hour long service. I scamper behind, the creaking steps the only proof of my existence.

Marilla rarely speaks to me during a service. Timing is of the essence. It is her orchestra to conduct. When she speaks, she directs: Fork, slightly off from parallel and two thumbnail lengths from the edge instead of one, must be righted. Linen changed and table set in one minute. Check for cleared plates, but do not linger. Smile, but do not engage. Always be doing something.

At this time and this place, other roles and commitments fall away. I look into your eyes and place a plate in front of you without ever realizing I was there—it is just sensations and flavors and conversation and memories flowing without knowing you are not alone with your best self.

I pick up a knife off the oriental carpet and slide it, blade down, into my apron pocket.

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Warnings can be invitation to take part in something life changing. “Keep your distance from her, okay?” one of the two other waitresses cautions like the surgeon general before heading out back for a smoke.

Marilla enters the room just as the door slams, sending a cloud of smoke from the small gathering into the room.

“You have to be careful not to miss things at first glance. There is always something you won’t see,” she says unblinkingly, all the while holding a crystal glass into the light and smoke, examining it for water spots.

Marilla does not smoke. In fact, she is usually on an extreme health kick and snacking means mixing green powdered spirulina, a bacteria found in tropical lakes, into her raw goat’s milk yogurt and loading it unceremoniously onto a spoon and through her unpainted lips during a minute’s break. I was told I needed to start on the supplement and was given my dose to take at home, three times a day. I complied.

I had never met anyone else like Marilla in real life. She had been a waitress for 30 years. No children. No ring on her left hand to clank on the wine bottle she was opening at the table—she had a relationship once, she claimed. She didn’t get sick and miss work. Consistent as the sunrise. Her customers loved her.

What did Marilla love, though? What did all of these empty plates and endless stairs and twenty percent tips amount to in the end?

My obsession with restaurants began at the ripe age when feet still dangle from chairs. By age seven I was ordering tender raviolis stuffed with morels and eating my dessert off granite-slab serving platters. I knew, when I ordered bleu cheese instead of ranch with my salad, a nod of satisfaction would follow. I would observe and dissect the

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behaviors of the waitstaff as they made their way to each table, confidently seducing the diners with their gastronomical vernacular: bal-sa-mic re-duc-tion, ma-sa-la do-sa; they had this ability to appear as servants at your table, there to grant your every desire, but always walked away like royalty. They surrounded themselves with people in the heat of life, trained masters of the human experience. To me, this was a beautiful purpose. I wanted to understand these mythical beings, I thought I wanted to be one.

Scraping the last of a chatty old woman's untouched potato mash into the kitchen's central garbage, I marvel at the remnants left by people who forgo nourishment for pleasure. This woman, drenched in her silk scarves, had been attempting to catch a drip of water from the ceiling (also attributed to the charm of old houses) into her wine glass, and was encouraging others at the table to do the same, as a sort of post-dinner amusement while seeming to have forgotten about the fifteen dollar portion of potatoes on her plate.

I notice Marilla standing in the little corner of the kitchen reserved for waitstaff—a cluttered alley of corks, random holiday decorations, a million pens that didn't write. It was a safe corner though, away from it all, her place to wait for decades now as her customers finished eating, her only true piece of real estate in this building out of sight of needy customers and demanding chefs. She's meticulously checking over receipts from the night. I join her and silently watch as I pick at the rice and vegetables Phil had left for me. Trying to talk during certain activities only elicits silence from Marilla. Something in her demeanor shifted though, after a month of standing silently together in this corner. Many nights now, when she is through most of her service, she begins to talk.

Tonight, she pulls out a pencil and a mint green order slip out of her pocket and begins to carefully draw boxes. Just like my students, she keeps erasing her work and

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starting over. She had been saving up for years, she says, and she put her life's savings into this house—these boxes. She rubs the eraser hard over the willowy lines again. She designed it to be extremely efficient and beautiful. Satisfied, she marks all the large windows and the fixtures in the room.

“You’re into design, aren’t you?” She says, as she studies her own rendering. Marilla, the toughest woman I had ever known, is asking me about design.

“I enjoy good design.”

“Alright. I need you to help me figure out the furniture to put in my home.”

For twenty minutes, she is my student. We talk flow, colors, textures, the Feng Shui. I am even able to comment briefly on the value of a well-placed pillow or painting to warm up a room—though I can’t imagine what painting she would choose. We play with the layout of couches in a modern space such as her’s. Others wander through as words like “monochromatic” and “credenza” are spilling forth from my mouth and I can feel their questioning eyes burning into me, but I continue on unresponsive.

“I should have you out sometime and we could have a glass of wine on the balcony at sunset,” she says for the chef, the dishwasher and the Hawaiian dolls that sway above our heads to hear, then she disappears to the other side, leaving me staring at the flapping doors.

I wondered if anyone had ever been invited to drink wine with Marilla on her balcony and consider the intense Montana prairie sunsets. What would we talk about? Some deeper philosophies on humanity’s purpose? Would the wine have a shot of spirulina in it? Would I find that she and I had seen eye to eye on these things, more than most people I had encountered? Maybe we were both outliers of our generations, the ones who

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question the way things were—the why, and never settled. Maybe I was on my way to becoming Marilla—the one people would attach warning notices to.

Upstairs at Giovanni's there is a closet-sized room where the waitstaff can duck in when trays of drinks become overwhelming. Late one night, when my calves were nearly threatening to give up on me from a fifteen-hour day, after carefully hauling a tray up of what was promised to be the last round of drinks ordered by the architecture firm, Marilla gracefully took the tray from my arms and pointed to the room. "There's a little something for you in there," she said accompanied by, what was now, a less rare smile.

Hidden behind the bar there was a plate from downstairs with a dessert from the actual menu waiting for me. In that room, from that moment on, I secretly dined at Giovanni's each evening. I ate the creme carmel with laced sugar with freshly whipped cream on top, the flourless chocolate torte with raspberry coulis and the pumpkin flan with a spiced tuille, just as the couple in the next room. Night after night, I was near to tears of joy as I ravenously consumed one giant spoonful at a time, before wiping my mouth and facing the customers who were in need of more forks or ice or, God forbid, A1 for their prime rib.

By this point in time, it was clear to all who worked at Giovanni's whose side I was on. Talk about Marilla would stop when I came into the room. Phil, the head chef, stopped treating me like a normal hostess; he was more serious with me. Other waitresses avoided small talk with me because they knew nothing Marilla and I ever talked about was small.

Late on a Saturday night, when it was just her and I, I casually mentioned how it seemed a person could tell which couples were genuinely in love just by how they ordered from the menu. It was then, beneath the greenish glow of the waitress corner, that tears

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began to fall quickly, uncontrolled, onto her dry, hard cheeks. She looked at me as if grasping for air, as if she didn't understand what this was pouring forth from her.

Marilla had been in love once. Or so she thought. It was some twenty years ago, she said, her eyes growing wide at the marking of time, as if she had just woken up. Her "friends" at the restaurant had set her up with him vowing they would be perfect together. She had let down her guard and agreed to meet him. They went on a few dates. He bought her gifts and doted on her, a new experience for her. Then she found out he was married and that everyone who had set her up had known this.

"They all said it was a joke," she choked, pulverizing a tissue to shreds in her wringing hands, "A joke." This is when she closed herself up and quit trusting humanity. Because it was all a cruel joke waiting to happen.

The following week, when spring was in full, wet bloom, I donned my most weathered jeans, laced up my hiking boots, and securely perched myself behind the wheel of my Buick for a country drive. John Denver completed the mood as I straddled the sticky peaks and valleys of the rocky road.

"Take me home, to the place I belong..." filled the dense air, as I imagined finally getting to remove my shoes at Marilla's and pad around her lovely empty home with my wine glass in hand, using my free hand to paint a clearer picture of my ideas for her space. Sometimes, it was difficult to know what exactly to talk about around her, but today, I wasn't worried. After a few miles, a modern concrete house firmly planted on the crest of a butte, came into view—just as I had imagined.

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From the looks of it, she had several acres of land and it was all contained by a tall wrought iron gate at the front. The rampant growth of bindweed on the gate made it impossible for one to see through; how would she ever know if anyone came to visit? Thankfully, she answered my phone call and ran out to let me drive through.

I get out to give her a hug. My arms easily envelop a form that suddenly seems less domineering in this open space.

“I can’t wait to show you around,” she proudly announces. I follow her and then walk beside her, feeling closer and more of an equal on this ground.

Approaching the house, I feel a warm pressure on my leg. I bend down to stroke the head of the grey and white cat that has come up to greet me. Now another set of eyes are before me, asking for similar attention and I give in. And another. I glance up to find I am crouched in a flood of felines. They knit themselves in and out of our legs, each one granting us approval and then darting ahead to the house, not stopping, but wandering up and into a sliding glass door that is wide open.

Marilla is busily describing her daily routine as we pass the house.

“Around two hundred animals to feed and I’ll be getting more soon. Done it by myself, bet you never guessed I could do it. I start my day at five with the chickens. Jake here,” she says, patting the stiff-haired Husky Mix who has just matched step to join us, “is my best assistant. I’ll crack eggs for him and leave the treat in secret places for him to find. I know he finds ‘em because he’ll always have yolk dripping from his snout. By six, I’m in with the goats. Did you know one was named after you? She’s the rebel.”

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I lose her words as I peer through the heavily windowed house at the jungle of plants that have deserted their native environment for the more domestic environment of Marilla's empty living room—where I had planned for the modern couches to go. Lanky cats stretch out across the soapstone countertops and lounge in the stainless-steel sink. Two are chasing a dust ball around the concrete-floored living room. The window panes still have their stickers on them, but are lightly frosted in years of farm dirt. It is clear that no human lives in this house or will be allowed to live in this house anytime soon.

Marilla rattles off goat varieties, as she hands me a plastic bucket of feed. The goats, with their bristly chin hair, eat from my hand and then are back to ramming each other off the dirt mound. Marilla tells me the name of each goat and what their personality is like. Then we visit the shelter she has built for her cats. She fails to mention that they currently live in her house. The cat house is a replica of a human house with windows and doors, siding and high enough ceilings to stand beneath. She winds me through the east wing of the cat house and in the back corner a rumpled up sleeping bag, a stack of clothing and a hair and tooth brush, sit in obscurity, like a modern art exhibition attempting to capture “the less-cluttered life.”

She catches my wandering eyes. “I’ve been feeding a kitten whose mother abandoned it. I need to stay with it through the night.”

Outside again, where I can breath, Marilla says, “I hope you’ll still want to talk to me after seeing how I live. This is who I am.” I look back to her house as we pass again and squint into the last of the day’s sun up at her balcony. I wonder if she has ever stepped foot on it? She opens her gate, meaning it is time to go, and shooshes the cats away so I can

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drive through. I see her waving as I drive down the gravel, an empty pit in my stomach I don't quite understand.

Driving back, I realize there is so much about Marilla that I will never understand. So much time spent asking "Why?" of my own desires, of the desires of others, her desires. I look for answers in the ritualistic processes of everyday life we as humans have created to pass the time: the school day, the dinner service, the relationship, the moments spent alone in bordello-red bathrooms, the sketches of dreams on paper to the reality of paper still on the windows. The process of waking, working and dying that we all must fold ourselves into.

The sun is gone now, all that is left is a reddish afterglow painted on gauzy clouds. I want to imagine the light bending gracefully in tune with the curve of the earth. But the truth is that it is refracting, each ray encountering water and dust and shooting off in a new direction. The light sensor in the car reads the change and headlights appear on the road.

I will follow down paths uninvited to find the answer to my questions, sleep in a bag of kittens in need of feeding, I will cry your tears when you can no longer. The process is one that I can map, and attempt to replicate and yet, I will never be you Marilla.