

A Job Well Done

By Pat O'Malley

After eighteen months of working as a server at Fortuna's Italian Restaurant, Sarah Whatley had learned how to deal with all kinds of bullshit. Obnoxious customers, lewd older men, screaming supervisors and every frustration under the sun she had encountered. Anyone expecting was left disappointed. Every time something at her job pissed her off, she would put on her friendliest smile, take food orders, clean tables and in her own words “provide service like a mother fucker.” So every time her fat bald manager, Antonio snapped at her or one of the customers looked right through her, she just pushed it out of her mind and responded acted like the friendliest waitress you could hope for.

“Killing them with kindness,” her father had called it.

When she wasn't waiting tables, Sarah was in grad school working on her MBA and planning for her future. Money was tight but she didn't have to worry about paying student loans because her father, Hal was helping to pay for the majority of the tuition and Sarah couldn't thank him enough.

“So did you think of anywhere you'd like to go tonight?” Her father asked her over the phone.

Today was his birthday.

“ Yeah! I was going to tell you I found this Mexican place that just opened up in Seaford that looks pretty good.” A safe bet. Sarah knew that her father liked Mexican food.

“ That's a great idea! I was getting kind of tired of going diners anyway. I didn't like that the waiters were starting to recognize me. I don't want to be known as a “diner guy.”

Sarah laughed. She was on her break outside the restaurant and was enjoying the fresh air. Outside it was mild but inside the restaurant was easily fifteen degrees warmer, at least. Sarah had her blonde hair tied in a ponytail and was wearing a white collared shirt. She was 5'6 with light skin and curves in just the right places usually hidden by her formal attire but at that moment she had taken off her blazer as the sun had made wearing that outside impossible.

The plan was for her to finish up her shift, run home and get ready to meet up for dinner with her Dad at the new Mexican place. Still, to Sarah her shift at the restaurant wasn't exactly speeding by. She had been at work since 8:30 AM yawning while setting up tables perfectly aware that work was going to be busy yet time was still going to somehow drag.

Also outside enjoying a five minute break from the back and forth rush was one of Sarah's sweaty co-workers Mike, a skinny guy with black hair was lighting a cigarette. Making eye contact with her, he motioned to her asking if she wanted a cigarette. Sarah shook her head politely declining. She was proud of herself for having quit smoking whereas before she could hardly make it through a chaotic shift without a brief smoke break, now she didn't need to smoke to make it through the day.

Sarah said goodbye to her Dad, stuffed the smartphone back into her pocket and stepped back into the noise and the heat. Today the waitress scheduled to take over her shift was fairly the recent hire Audrey Turner, who of course, she still hadn't shown up yet. Trying not to fret over this Sarah returned to her section and was relieved to see that it was cleared out. Her good

fortune just kept on coming when she went over to clean her last table after the customers left and saw the thousand yard stare of Andrew Jackson pinned beneath an empty water glass.

For the first time that day, Sarah smiled honestly. Choosing to be kind and friendly to someone always felt good but it didn't hurt be reminded that sometimes it also had its rewards. Energized by her tip, Sarah hurried with cleaning up her last table. It was 3:20 PM, her shift was almost over and Audrey would be here to replace her in no time. Still smiling, Sarah, thought to herself that there was nothing quite like the victorious sense of euphoria that came with the final minutes before finishing up work for the day, especially after how long today had been.

Imagine her frustration when her shift manager Antonio told her that Audrey was running late and he needed Sarah to work over time in her section until Audrey arrived.

Anxious about her schedule, Sarah looked for the positives in the situation. It shouldn't be more than an extra hour and the over time paid her for a little more than she usually made per hour. Still, this would put Sarah in a tight spot where she would have much less time to get ready for dinner with her Dad. Mustering up some confidence and optimism, Sarah accepted her supervisor's demand with a smile and nod.

Then the doors opened and everything went straight to hell.

In walked a middle aged couple, well presumably a couple given how it at first looked as though they were holding each other's hands but then Sarah noticed it was really more like the woman was pulling the man by his wrist. The woman was small and round with short white hair and glasses wearing a salmon colored shirt and white pants. Her partner was tall with bushy white hair and an equally white mustache that almost took attention away from the glazed look in

his eyes. Time stopped dragging and straight up froze as Sarah made eye contact with the woman who then immediately power walked towards Sarah.

“Excuse me? Could you get us a table for two please?”

“Hey guys, right this way.”

“What did you say? You need to speak up! I cant understand you.”

“Follow me and I’ll seat you!” Sarah smiled politely as she tried to articulate her words better.

“Are you kidding me? Theres plenty of tables open! Carl tell her that she should seat us!”

“What?” the bushy haired mustached man blinked in a daze. His eyes were red and blood shot.

A vein twitched in Sarah’s temple as she took a deep breath through her nose. Clearly this woman was hard of hearing, Sarah would just have to be patient with her.

“No worries, there’s a table right here.” Sarah said trying to start over.

Seconds later, Sarah led them over to an empty table in the center of her section. The woman wore a tight frown and seemed skeptical as if she was analyzing the table for any hidden syringes. Her husband, Carl, took off his navy blue blazer and pulled it over on his chair. Anxiously, Sarah kept looking at the front doors to see if Audrey had arrived earlier than she said she would. Then she heard the older woman bark at her again.

“Excuse me? Hello!”

“Can I get you guys started with something to drink?”

“What did you say? Carl tell her she needs to speak up!”

“I’ll have a Pina colada,” the man said blinking into existence.

“ Yes, I’ll have a Cabernet and he’ll have the Pina colada. You’re going to need to give us a few minutes to go over the menu,” the older woman said dryly not looking at Sarah.

“ Of course, take your time,” Sarah started to walk away.

“While we do that could you have the air conditioning turned down? Its too cold in here. Do you think you could do that?” The middle aged woman asked condescendingly

She was squinting her eyes looking Sarah up and down as if she were inspecting a rusty car.

Sarah who actually thought the air was beginning to feel stuffy nodded.

“Absolutely!”

Despite her positive attitude, more challenges appeared for Sarah when she learned from the bartender that the Pina colada mixer was broken and the only one available was the spare one in the basement. With a thin smile still painted on her face, Sarah went into the kitchen, past the ovens and down the stairs that led to where Fortuna's kept all of it’s appliances in storage. It took longer than Sarah would have liked for her to locate the spare working blender but eventually she finally found it. The machine was small but it was a heavy duty blender made of cold solid steel so grasping the contraption in her hands as she slowly and painfully made her way back up the stairs put a decent amount of strain on her back.

In another minute, Sarah brought the drinks back to her table and was immediately treated to this pleasant exchange from the older woman:

“Let me ask you something...is the pasta gluten free?”

“Do you have an allergy?”

The older woman’s face soured as if the question had caused her physical harm.

“What?!”

“DO. YOU. HAVE. AN. ALLERGY?” Sarah repeated louder.

“Don't speak to me like I'm an idiot. I meant 'what' as in its none of your business if I have an allergy! You should treat every food as if it has gluten or might cause an allergic reaction. Every food that could possibly be gluten free should be treated as an allergy!”

“Oh, I'm sorry. You're absolutely right.”

“ In fact I think I'm going to get the calamari for an appetizer followed by the linguini and clam sauce. Carl do you want to get that as an appetizer as well?”

“ No thanks Linda. I want to save my appetite.”

“ He'll have the calamari also.”

Carl sighed and slumped in his chair like a deflating and emasculated balloon. The older man seemed to be looking at nothing in particular but something was going on behind those defeated eyes of his. Sarah found herself feeling sorry for him. It was becoming clear that Linda may have been hard of hearing but somehow she seemed to only hear what she wanted to hear.

“ You got it, and for your main course?”

“ I'll have the fettuccini Alfredo.”

“All right, I'll be back with your appetizers in just a moment.”

Things looked to be back on track, Sarah had gotten their drinks and taken their orders. The hard part should have been over. After many frustrating minutes, Sarah came back to her table and dropped off their order of calamari for two and refilled their drinks. Arguably then biggest challenge for Sarah was not checking to see if Audrey had finally shown up yet.

“You can do this,” she thought to herself reassuringly as she looked at herself in the dirty mirror of the women’s staff bathroom.

When it looked like Linda had finished with the scraps still left on her plate, Sarah walked over and began to take the dirty plate before Linda smacked Sarah’s hand away.

“Excuse me, do I look finished to you?”

Linda kept talking but it sounded as if she was underwater with the sound muffled. It didn’t make much of a difference, Sarah could still hear every penetrating, irritable syllable meant to criticize her. Carl just shot Sarah a sad pleading stare, this was the closest she would get to an apology for his wife’s behavior. Sarah couldn’t remember the last time she had been this angry. She had put up with a lot of shit in her times a server but she had never waited on a customer with the nerve to actually swat her hand away. It took every ounce of patience, rationale and common sense for Sarah not to chew this entitled woman out right then and there.

Carl handed his empty glass to Sarah with a wet napkin still attached to the bottom of the glass. Walking back to get Carl another Pina colada, Sarah removed the wet napkin from the glass and saw that there was a mostly intact message on it written in black sharpie marker.

“ **HELP ME,**” it said

Wide-eyed, Sarah looked back at the table. The older man continued to sit there and stare into space. He didn’t look anxious or desperate for help and did not return Sarah’s gaze. For someone who’s life was supposedly endangered, he certainly didn’t look too bothered by it. Turning back to the kitchen Sarah crumpled the napkin with the message on it into her pants pocket. That man looked like he was on eight different types of medication carefully designed to help him put up with the harping of the woman he married. The henpecked man was either set-

ting up Sarah for a bad joke or probably didn't even realize that he had even written that plea for help.

Soon the meals for her table were ready and in a flash Sarah was setting the plates down smiling as she told them both to enjoy. She took a few steps before she heard that shrill voice defile the air once again. Sarah did her best not to cringe as she flaunted her politician's smile and turned to face the woman she dreaded.

"Let me ask you something," Linda said as she finished guzzling down another glass of wine.

"Of course!"

"Why are you trying to kill me?"

Once more, the restaurant had gone silent to Sarah's ears. To her credit, she somehow managed to keep her jaw from dropping.

"I-I'm sorry? I don't--"

"Yes you ARE sorry. You gave me linguini with gluten. I cant have linguini with gluten I already told you this."

" Oh I'm so sorry. Let me go get you a gluten free pasta."

"Try not to screw it up this time," the woman guzzled down more wine.

Taking the incorrect pasta in her hand, Sarah pushed the fact that she had already asked the woman if she had an allergy out of her mind and headed back to the kitchen. After what felt like forever, Sarah made reached that golden moment where the annoyed chef handed her the adjusted pasta. Trying not to spill the plate, Sarah briskly made her way back to her table praying

that this order would suffice. As she placed the steaming gluten free linguini on to the table, Sarah noticed that Linda's husband had not yet touched his meal.

Not long after she set the plate down and much to Sarah's relief, Linda began picking at the pasta, feeding small bites into a content grimace. It didn't matter that she didn't thank Sarah for delivering the improved food, her silent approval of the food was all the relief Sarah needed and she really needed it. Not as quickly as she would have liked but eventually both of the couple's plates were cleared and thank God Linda asked for the check shortly after folding her napkin on the plate.

It was 5:05 PM, over an hour past when Sarah's shift was supposed to end and five minutes after Audrey was supposed to have shown up. The anxiety of wanting to rush out the door or risk missing her Dad's birthday dinner combined with the condescending attitude of that woman down her throat was putting Sarah on edge. Her heart was beating, her head was swimming and now she was a sweating mess. All attempts at composure had gone out the window. As soon as she cleared the check for her table she was going to march over to Antonio for an update. She had no idea what was happening with Audrey but she was going to tell him that she couldn't stay any longer.

If she she rushed home within the next few minutes she could shower up and meet her Dad for dinner before it got too late in the evening.

Quickly as she could, Sarah ran Linda's credit card on the scanner at the hostess stand in the front of the restaurant. To the sound of a negative beep, the screen displayed DECLINED in big red letters. Sarah nervously ran the card through again, carefully holding it steady so it went through smoothly. Angry red letters of rejection flashed into her eyes once more. With a forced

but reassuring smile on her face and the card in her trembling hand, Sarah slowly made her way back to the couple at her table. In her mind, she may as well have been walking to the gallows.

“Um...I’m terribly sorry but this card has been declined. Do you have another card you could use?”

“WHAT?!”

The volume made Sarah flinch. She looked around nervously, the outburst had drawn the stares of the other customers. Her friend and co-server Meghan looked like she had been in the middle of taking orders from this one family, now she looked over at Sarah with a sad sympathetic look in her eyes. Meanwhile Sarah was face to face with an older woman whose eyes were bulging out of her skull.

“Oh sorry about that, I think I have another-“ her husband reached for his pockets.

“DONT APOLOGIZE!” Linda roared.

Now everyone in the restaurant was looking over at Sarah; where the outburst had come from. An uncomfortable silence filled the room. It was one thing for a crying infant to cause a disruption in the middle of a restaurant. Everyone knew that the infant didn’t know any better but see a middle aged woman throwing a tantrum was just as depressing as it was awkward to watch.

Linda had now gotten up from her chair. Her face was growing more red with each passing second. Sarah thought she could see veins popping out of Linda’s barrel-like neck.

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing?! You’ve been nothing but a smart ass to my husband and I since the minute we walked in! Now you’re trying to embarrass me in front of my husband and everyone here but I won’t let you! I want to speak to your manager! Go get your manager right now!”

“ I’m the manager. What seems to be the problem ma’am?” Sarah almost jumped, Antonio had rushed over from the front of the restaurant.

“I’ll tell you what the problem is! This little hussy you call a waitress has done nothing provide terrible and act rudely to my husband and I! Now she thinks she can humiliate me by making it look like my credit card has been decline! Just what kind of restaurant are you running here?”

“ Excuse me, theres no need to call my servers anything rude. Let me see your card and I’ll scan it,” Antonio cast an aggravated eye at Sarah.

“Take them all! I don’t care what card you use, I just want out of this dump,” Linda shouted hysterically as she handed over a collection of black and silver plastic cards.

Antonio walked over to the card scanner and swiped it through. The words DECLINED flashed in response. Sarah started to feel sick.

“SHE DID SOMETHING TO THE MACHINE!” Linda had now reached the point where she was screaming bizarre accusations at Sarah.

In a few more moments Sarah thought that the older woman would add practicing witchcraft to her mounting list of accusations towards her.

Sarah wasn’t much happier than Linda. This was a nightmare. Why couldn’t the cards go through so she could go home already? Her father was probably wondering why she hadn’t called him. It wasn’t enough that this woman had bullied Sarah all throughout her meal now she was causing a scene and trying to get her fired.

“Ma’am please keep your voice down. Maybe we can call your credit card company.” Antonio was hastily trying to get the situation under control.

“You’re taking her side! Are you blind??? *Is this entire restaurant insane?! When I was growing up we lived in a little thing called society! Now people like you are molesting the rights of people like me and other tax payers! When does the corruption end?!“*

“I’m sorry I gave you bad service,” Sarah voice cracked as she looked at the floor. She could feel her eyes welling up with hot water.

“WHAT?! What did you say?? Speak UP you imbecile! Speak uh-

Linda’s rant was cut off by a wet choking sound. Linda lurched forward and vomited a torrent of red wine and sea food all over Antonio. Gagging and breathing heavily, Linda’s wide eyes weren't angry anymore, they were panicked. Her beet red face was sweating profusely and she was clutching her chest tightly. Grasping the table cloth with her other hand to steady herself, Linda’s eyes rolled into her head and down she fell dragging the tablecloth and scattering the silverware everywhere on the floor with a rattle of clangs accompanied by a loud THUMP!

“Oh my God, she’s having a heart attack!” Someone shouted.

“Huh? What?” Carl the dying woman’s husband shook his head out of a daze.

“ Out the way, I know CPR!” The words left Sarah’s mouth before she realized what she was doing.

As customers, servers and a vomit soaked Antonio watched in frozen awe, Sarah flipped Linda on to her back and began rhythmically pressing down on the older woman’s chest. Four years of being a life guard at her town’s beach club had left the instructions for CPR pretty clear on Sarah’s mind. After a few more percussions, Sarah gagged a little herself as she wiped the remaining vomit from Linda’s mouth, pinched her nose and breathed into her mouth in rapid succession.

The smell of the wine and bile on the unconscious woman's breath made Sarah's eyes water. Only a few moments ago this woman had been screaming at her and now Sarah was trying to save her life. Life sure was funny sometimes. Her father had always taught her that everyone deserves help and while Sarah had thought that had sounded naive at first, she still couldn't get the lesson out of her head. So far no luck, Linda still wasn't breathing and her face was shifting from red to purple. The longer she failed to breathe, the more desperate Sarah's attempts at resuscitation became.

This whole evening shouldn't have happened. How did she get here? Where the hell was that God damn Audrey? What was Sarah going to say to her Dad? Sarah didn't know, Sarah didn't care; this woman may have made her miss her Dad's birthday dinner but she wasn't dying on her watch.

"Come on! Breathe! Breathe dammit!" Sarah had gone from precise pumps into Linda's heart to pounding on the woman's chest with the knuckles of her fists.

"Sarah stop! She's breathing!" It was Mike, tall, sweaty and reeking of tar.

Sarah blinked. It took her a moment to realize that she was being dragged off the unconscious woman's body. Half a dozen customers had rushed over and were now gathered around Linda fanning the woman with menus to give her some air. Sitting there on a floor in a daze of adrenaline and sore muscles, Sarah could faintly see Linda still with her back on the floor but she could still make out the stout woman's stomach rising and deflating. In the background, Sarah could hear several people on their phones calling for an ambulance. Linda's husband Carl, was still seated at his table with a confused and vaguely anxious look on his face.

"Oh, so she's all right? Do you still need my card?"

The ambulance arrived shortly after Linda had begun to breathe again. Sarah last saw Linda on a gurney being loaded into an ambulance outside with a look of mild irritability on her still unconscious face. Sarah was still in a daze over what the hell had just happened, barely listening to her co-workers and customers cheer her on when she saw Audrey stroll on through the front door with headphones in her ears and a puzzled look on her face.

By 8 PM, the police officers told her that they had all the statements they needed. There were more than enough witnesses who all told the same story of the small round woman losing her temper, falling down and Sarah, the waitress who swooped in to save her from certain death. All of Sarah's co-workers crowded around in a blur of happy words calling her badass and asking her about waiting on that table. She couldn't answer them, she didn't even know where to begin, she didn't really want to. Sarah was physically and emotionally exhausted.

What a perfect time for her to realize that she had completely forgotten to call or text her father.

As soon as she could sneak away from her co-workers applauding her for being a hero, she pulled out her phone and called her Dad. Their conversation was brief but a major relief for Sarah. Her father had been worried after not hearing from her but he more than understood after he heard the entire story. They would find a new time within the next few days to have that birthday dinner. Sarah would present to him

When she hung up the phone she saw that Linda's husband Carl was standing in the parking lot leaned up against a black Lexus, presumably his, and staring at his phone. The white glow from the smart phone illuminated Carl's face so she could see that his face continued to dis-

play the casual look of defeated resignation that he had most likely developed during his marriage to Linda.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Hmmm? Oh it’s you. Weren't you our waitress?”

“ Yes, I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am about everything that happened.”

“ Don’t trouble yourself. Things were really getting a little hairy in there weren't they? But I wanted to be sure to thank you for saving my wife’s life. I know she was pretty rough on you, she’s like that to everyone but she was a good woman once. That’s why I married her.”

“ Please don’t worry about that I’m just happy I could do what I could.”

“ Did you hear when the paramedics said that her brain was cut off from oxygen for too long?”

“ E-excuse me?”

“ Mhmmm. Basically, they told me its looking unlikely that she’s going to wake up any time soon. Even if she did, that lack off of oxygen to her brain makes brain damage likely.”

“ I-I don't know what to say. Thats terrible.”

“Right? Who would have thought that the only thing that could change that woman’s mind was some brain damage? Some might say it would have been better if she had jus died rather than live in her condition but everyone knows theres nothing more valuable than your life. Any other waiter probably wouldn’t have helped but it was obvious you knew what you were doing,” there was something odd about the smile beneath that mustache now.

Whatever it was, Sarah didn’t like it. The man standing in front of her wasn’t the anesthetized doormat she had believed him to be. The way he was talking to her it was almost as he

wasn't surprised about what happened to his wife and then there was that note he had slipped her....

“ Like I said Linda was rough on everyone,” he continued. “If something like today didn't happen it was only a matter of time before she was rude to the wrong person. Either way you're one hell of a server. In fact, this is for your troubles.”

The snowy haired man who had appeared nearly catatonic all afternoon reached into his wallet and pulled out a crisp hundred dollar bill that he handed to Sarah.

“ Oh no please, I cant take this.”

“ Please, take it. I'd give you more if I could but thats all I have one me. You should be proud of a job well done,”

There was a sly tone in his voice. As if he was speaking of an unspoken secret that only she and he were aware.

“Why are you trying to kill me?” The earlier surreal words of his wife came back to her.

“I-“ Sarah didn't like what she thought he was getting at. She remembers the napkin with the message from before. This man's wife had just had a terrible medical emergency. It goes without saying that the heart wrenching emotional toll of such an experience has to do something to a husband's mind. Based on how he now sounded now, outside in the dark, Sarah didn't think she wanted to know what the hell was going on inside the mind of the man offering her the hundred. Once again, her body acted before her thoughts could catch up and she saw herself silently taking the hundred dollar bill.

“Um, earlier today before your wife's fall, why did you pass me-“

“ Sorry, I’ve actually got to to meet up with the paramedics at the hospital. Again., I cant thank you enough for saving my wife’s life. I hope you know you’re a hero,” he winked at her before hopping into his car, pulling out in reverse and speeding off into the night.

Lighting a cigarette that she had bummed from Mike shortly before calling her Dad, Sarah thought of using the money for her father’s belated birthday dinner. The nagging suspicion of what exactly was going on with the husband was still in her mind. Between the sense of relief and nonchalant attitude he’d displayed to her....but that was impossible! There’s now way that he could have known what was going to happen to his wife. Right?

“Eh, screw it,” she thought. She’d had enough for one day.

Crumpling the napkin with the smeared cryptic message in her hands, Sarah pushed the unimaginable out of her mind. Perhaps there were some questions better left unanswered and she should take what she can get. Standing there with the smoke from her cigarette drifting into the cool night air, Sarah watched the man drive further and further away until the car was lost to the cover of darkness.

She never saw him or his wife ever again.