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HUM 2504
"Gig" Narrative
4/22/10

I am a server at an Olive Garden in southwestern Virginia. I started at the restaurant right when it opened and I've been working there for a little over two years. I needed somewhere flexible because I'm going to school and I'm a single mother. It's my first job serving and, to be honest, I'm kind of surprised that I was hired without any experience. I guess I'm a natural, though, because I was promoted to service trainer in just a few months.

The thing that I always tell new servers is to move faster than they're moving. And here's the reason why, you are totally responsible for making your own tip. So if you get the customer's salad out to them faster than any other server has, than you're going to get a bigger tip from that customer than any other server has.

Also, the faster you move, the more times you can flip your tables. But you also have to be careful not to rush the guests. When you walk up to your table, you have from zero to three minutes to build a rapport with them. That's basically when they decide what your tip is. So the rest of the experience, as the guest is eating, they're unconsciously or consciously subtracting from the tip they decided you were getting. So don't rush the beginning.

One of the perks of being a service trainer is that I get to pick my own schedule. I work during the weekends when my daughter, Lily, is with her father. I work the Friday dinner shift and doubles on Saturday and Sunday, about 30 hours of work in three days. I always get off of work late because I have to stay until all of the other servers leave. But I don't have to do any side work and I get the cream of the crop sections, so it's worth it.

The managers are all right. I've been working for a while, so I have some clout and respect. There is some degree of favoritism, though. I've seen them be pretty petty once or twice. But I guess they generally pick favorites based on performance. You know, they'll treat you better if you act better. So I happen to be one of the favorites, but I can see that if that ever spun in a different direction, I would hate it.

What's really ridiculous about Olive Garden, though, is the uniforms. You have to wear a white oxford shirt, buttoned to the tip top of the collar. You either have it to, you know, the appropriate length for your arm, or it must roll up at least twice. You have to have black pants, and if they have belt loops than you have to wear a belt. Your apron has to be wrapped around your waist and tied in the front, folded over. But you can't fold your apron over more than once. Some girls fold them a lot so they're really short like a mini skirt, but it's an apron, you know? Everything has to be completely pristine, so I spend a lot of money on clothes.

Serving gets super boring, super quick. I mean, you meet different people every time, but you'd be surprised about how repetitive it gets. Every night, it's seating, serving, goodbye, seating, serving, goodbye.

Occasionally, though, something interesting will happen. Once, a couple asked me to join in their sex. They're regulars of mine, so they still request me every now and then because I stopped talking to them. But that's awkward. I mean, what do you do? I didn't complain or anything because I still wanted my tip. But you know, I didn't entertain the offer or anything. They tip really well, but I won't serve them anymore because there's nothing worse than being stuck with people for an hour and feeling uncomfortable.

Customers are usually pretty nice, but you get a few that expect perfection. There's just no way. You might have perfect service sometimes, but you can get the same server every single time and there's going to be some times that they don't give you perfect service. At Olive Garden, servers will have to stop what they're doing to run hot food or they'll get written up. So if a customer tells you, "I'm really, really thirsty, I need to have a diet coke immediately," and then they see you at some other table running food, they're going to be upset. People have to have their expectations for humans, not some sort of weird outer space alien that can do everything every time.

There are two kinds of guests. There are people that like silent service and people who want dinner and a show, you know. You can tell pretty early; they'll give you cues about which they are. It can be awkward though, because you'll be performing for one table and just serving for these people and they'll feel like, "Oh, she's preferring them."

But I do pretty well, as far as tips go. As long as I'm working hard and genuinely happy, that's 20 percent. And at Olive Garden, you earn your perks from the customers. The business doesn't do anything for you. You don't get raises; you make \$2.13 an hour. And they don't feed you for free, regardless of what people think. We get 50% off meals and they try to tell you how to eat. Sometimes you have to eat standing up; sometimes you have to eat while you're serving tables. We're supposed to get breaks, but that doesn't always happen. I mean it's hard work. It's nonstop, too. Let's say one day you're sick or whatever. I mean, forget it, you know? You have to have a genuine smile the entire time. If it's not genuine, you have to learn how to act.

Ultimately, though, the job is worth the pay. There's a formula. It's BS and pay. And if it's off kilter in one direction, then you're going to love going to work every single day.

But if it's off kilter in the other direction, you hate your job. I definitely make more than I have to put up with. And I've never, my whole adult life, been able to work only 30 hours a week to support myself, let alone another human being. I need to go to school; school's my first priority, kind of, because I have to pay the bills, so I need to make a lot of money. You want a part time job that's not minimum wage? I just got lucky.

The flexibility of the job is so important for me, as a mother and a student. On the weekends I work like a dog so that I can be a fulltime mother and do schoolwork on the weekdays. Everything that I ever do is multitasking. When I'm at work, I'll print out pages of my book or a study sheet or whatever. I'm working and I'm studying. It has to be that way. When I'm in class, my daughter is at preschool. When we're at home, she'll sit with me and practice tracing lines and whatnot while I'm on my laptop doing homework.

Everything is double double double double.

I'm a part-time student at Tech right now, but I'm going to be a full-time student next fall so that I can qualify for grants. I'm racking up thousands of dollars in student loans, so even though I'll have to work less in the fall, in the end I'll have more money. And I'll graduate next year, finally. Then I can take it really slow getting my MBA.

I want to be a human resources manager. Being a mom, I would like to see some of that 9-5. Any other management whatsoever, including the management jobs that I've worked, has ridiculous hours. But the only reason that I'm going into management is that I've changed my major too many times and I don't want to throw my resume away. I'm done picking occupations because of what I like. I just want to make a lot of money.

I used to be a dreamer. But back in those days, my dreams would change often. I started out as a Spanish major because I wanted to travel the world. I wanted to meet

different people and teach English as a second language. But then I fell in love with a boy, so I couldn't travel the world anymore and I had to change my major. Then I had a class in that major that I just didn't like, so I changed majors again. I changed majors enough to where I'm 28 and still working on my bachelor's, so I'm not changing majors again and I'm not picking anything because of what I'd like because I'd probably be disappointed with the job.