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November 2017

The Plight of the Waitress

“So, can I get you guys any dessert tonight?” says Emily, the college sophomore studying to become a lawyer, who also waits tables with a smile.

The college-aged man, out to lunch with his guy friends, looks her up and down, starting at her feet, hovering over her chest, and ending with her eyes, to say, “Why have dessert when I could just have you?” his words drawn out like taffy. She laughs awkwardly in response, because she has to, in order to still receive a worthy tip.

The next table calls her over, also a group of all male customers, “uhh excuse me, I dropped my napkin, and I can’t reach it,” one of them says, while the others watch and nod along. She’s forced to bend down to retrieve the napkin, feeling their eyes upon her. “Why thank you, I really appreciate it,” the customer says, his intentions thinly veiled in his tone. Emily smiles uncomfortably, and speeds away to care for another table.

“Hey, wait, what ethnicity are you?” this time it’s a group of older white males.

“Umm Irish and Japanese,” she replies, hoping that’s the end of it, even though it’s already been too much.

“Ohh wow! That’s so *exotic*! I bet you like anime or something, right?” the men reply, excitedly and flirtily. She feigns another laugh, in order to save another tip, another contribution to her livelihood, even though she wants to defend herself, to retort back, to criticize them for fetishizing her just because of her ethnicity.

Welcome to a regular night at Harrisonburger.¹ Located in a prime location downtown for the past five years, this cozy restaurant boasts a rating of over 4.5 out of 5 stars on Google. Their awards only grow from there, as they were voted one of the best 12 burgers in Virginia, by virginia.com, and the most over-the-top burger by the esteemed Esquire Magazine. A small, dimly lit dining room with earth tone walls on one side, and on the other side a fully stocked, even more dimly lit, bar, with a couple of flat-screen TVs. A popular hotspot for locals, the nearby college kids, and families alike, Harrisonburger is perfectly simple with a casual ambiance to it.

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After a multitude of dreamy colors such as hot pink, bleach blonde, purple, and baby blue, Emily rather impulsively chopped off her shoulder-length locks, leaving behind shaved chocolate brown hair on top of her sweet freckled face. With a newfound confidence in herself, feeling more beautiful with short hair than ever before with long hair, Emily walked in to help open the restaurant for her summer shift.

“Are you having a midlife crisis? Do we need to send you to an insane asylum?” asks her boss Scott, one of the owners and general managers of Harrisonburger, the other is his wife, Anna. In his mid-thirties with salt and pepper hair, he has an arrogance about him that only comes from a false sense of superiority..

The forty-year-old male bartender chimes in, “You look like a little boy or a lesbian! You’re not going to get any tips you know!” Deflated, and knowing better than to talk back to the boss, Emily casts her head down and quietly walks away, to prepare for her shift.

¹ Please note that “Harrisonburger,” is a fictitious name for a very real restaurant. Additionally, all other names in this piece have been fabricated, in order to protect privacy, but these are completely real people who performed the explained actions.

Women still tip Emily the same amount, no matter the hair length or if she spent extra time applying makeup, but with men, it's hit or miss. Huge tips are rare for her now, despite serving at the same level, if not improving with her growing level of experience. Her average tips from men before, were way higher when her hair grazed the tops of her shoulders, on average a couple of dollars more in tips, per every couple of tables. She noted that customers, especially the older males objectified her more before her hair was shaved but they were nicer, and more generous tippers.

“On average less tips, but more weirdos,” she stated.

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One October Tuesday, typically really busy due to the discount on burgers, a generic-looking twenty-something guy had dinner with a friend, sitting at a table near the drinks station. As Emily poured Diet Cokes and iced teas into glasses for her tables, the man flirted with her, more or less repeating himself with every return to the drink station she was forced to make.

“That hair looks really good on you, you’re really beautiful,” he interrupted the ice-clinking into the glasses. He droned on about how she looks like “that girl from ‘Deadpool’ with the shaved head,” and “that girl from ‘Game of Thrones’ with the shaved head.”

“Uhh, thanks,” she walked away with the newly filled glasses, trying to shake away what she hoped was a one-time-only weird conversation. The guy’s friend had grown impatient and left, leaving the chatty guy alone at a table where the check was paid ten minutes ago. Emily’s customer needs a refill.

“Would you want to go back to my house to carve pumpkins?” the guy got bolder.

“Uhh no, I don’t think I can, I have to meet with people after my shift,” she lied, politely enough, and walked away as soon as the glasses were filled, her heart racing. After a few more minutes, he disappeared. But, twenty minutes later he reappeared sitting in precisely the same spot, alone. Another one of her customers needs a refill.

The man brought with him a gourd, most likely retrieved during his brief absence. With the place setting’s butter knife clutched in one hand and the gourd in the other, “This isn’t a pumpkin, but I’m gonna carve it right now in order to prove my love to you, so get me the sharpest knife from the kitchen!” He said this not in a scary, knife-wielding kind of way, but instead like this was something cute, like a funny pickup line.

“Um, I don’t think that I’m allowed to do that. My tables are waiting for me, I’m sorry,” she scurried away, shocked at his audacity, and uncomfortable with the thought of what would happen to her if the knife in the place setting was a steak knife instead. Finally after a half an hour of another waitress filling up Emily’s tables’ drinks, he grew discouraged and cut his losses, and Emily could finally breathe. When her shift was over that night, she ran to her car, looking behind her back with every step, praying that the guy hadn’t come back.²

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A tall, formidable man of seventy years walked in on a late Thursday night with his long grey hair tied into a ponytail and tucked under an out-of-style wide brimmed hat. After hanging out at the bar side for a bit, but never ordering anything, he made his way into the dining room.

² On November 14th, 2017, this man was hired by “Harrisonburger,” on the spot and without a resume, simply because he is friends with the owners’ favorite bartender. Emily was present when he was hired and he turned to her and said, “looks like we will be working together princess! I’m going to get to look at you all day!”

Standing at the servers' station, a little black podium in the corner of the dining room, the man cornered Emily while she had her back turned. His six foot five frame swallowed her four foot eleven frame whole.

With his front pressed against her back, and his head bent down towards her face, he made his move. "I'm warning you this time, but if you ever see me again, you should run as fast as you can because I'm gonna chase after you, and catch you. Then I'm gonna squeeze you as hard as I can, no matter how hard you struggle. So I'm just letting you know that I'll be back. I'm in love with you," he spoke quietly into her ear. Frozen with fear, Emily stood motionless until he walked away. She looked behind her shoulders to ensure that he really left, that the threat was really out of sight. She gazed out the front door into the dark downtown street as tears silently rolled down her face.

After fifteen minutes of crying in the bathroom she had calmed down enough to tell someone. As she wiped her tears away, Emily confided in another server, Kendall, a thirty-five year old, who recognized the creepy man.

"He has said weird stuff to me before, and one time he came in and squeezed me really tight," Kendall pauses and takes a deep breath to regain her composure, "and was groping me and wouldn't let me go," she described how this caused her to have a major panic attack. When she told Scott, he didn't understand why she was upset, and told her to just get back to work. After seeing what happened he didn't think it was a big deal. He forced her to go back to work right after her major panic attack, and without kicking the man out of his restaurant.

"He never orders anything, not even a drink, he just comes in to harass people. He has lived in Harrisonburg for a long time, and has come into the restaurant since it opened, but has

never bought anything,” Kendall continued as her hands moved along passionately and shakily with her words. That night, Emily asked a waiter to walk her to her car, fearing the worst, even on her short jaunt to the parking lot. She then drove to her boyfriend’s house to release the last of her tears and pent up fear and frustration.

A few days later at a staff meeting, Emily brought up this creepy seventy year old, and his threats to the female servers, hoping for the owners to ban him from entering the restaurant again.

Scott was unaffected, unconcerned, “wow I’m really surprised he said that. He’s harmless, he had a brain aneurysm two years ago. I’m telling you right now that he’s harmless. But this can’t be true. His wife doesn’t even let him go out that late at night, so there’s no way he could have been here when you’re closing. Sorry you got freaked out, but he’s harmless.”

“Yeah, he really is harmless Emily, just calm down,” repeated Anna.

Emily is not alone, unfortunately. 90% of waitresses experience sexual assault on the job. Two-thirds of women in the field reported being harassed by managers, and 78% reported harassment from customers. More than half of the women who reported sexual harassment said that it occurred on at least a weekly basis. The best hope for many of these waitresses is that their bosses will step in to defend them, to kick out the guys who treat them like objects, call the police if necessary, and ultimately foster a healthy working environment where employees feel safe and supported. But sometimes, the bosses are only contributing to misconduct and overall objectification of waitresses.

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After repeatedly only receiving three workday shifts, despite other people begging for someone to take their sixth shift off their hands, Emily barely made rent one month. She made her \$425 rent with only \$3 to spare, leaving her without groceries, she was forced to eat all that she could get out of her one-meal-a-day meal plan at her college. She served burgers and appetizers to customers as her own stomach grumbled with hunger.

“I’m not making enough money to cover my rent, I’m not even making cost of living,” Emily’s voice shook with nerves. “So I would really appreciate it if I could get four shifts a week instead of three, or maybe even every other week I could get four shifts,” Emily begged Scott and Anna.

“I’ll think about it,” Anna said with a cold, unaffected tone. One month later, they still haven’t gotten back to her.

Despite Emily’s lack of shifts, most servers and employees are drowning in their shifts, and Scott and Anna won’t let anyone cover them, forcing employees to stretch themselves too thin, and often risk their health.

One girl was forced to come in the day after having an outpatient surgery, even though the doctors told her to stay home and recuperate, Scott told her otherwise, told her that she’d be fired if she rested. Another girl was forced to come in the day of a blood transfusion, her doctors told her to rest, Scott said she’d be fired for not working. She was so weak that she couldn’t handle her tables, so Emily jumped in to help, she let the woozy girl sit down while she took care of the girl’s tables herself.

Harrisonburger is so under-staffed, because people keep quitting after being mistreated like this, and they refuse to hire any more college students, even though they are the vast majority of applicants in this college town.

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After just one phone call, Carol, a thirty-something woman, was hired as a server, and started the following day. Despite Emily hosting for two months before she was allowed to begin her five week server training.

“Oh thank god you’re here! I’m never hiring a college student again, they always skip shifts because they’re hungover, and come in drunk or high or something,” Scott admitted to Carol on her first day, she was the only non-college student that applied. However, to Emily’s knowledge, no one has ever skipped a shift after drinking too much, or come in under the influence. Except for Kyle. And Scott. Emily is the only college student left, leaving her to feel like a target, and an outcast.

Kyle, a messy looking late-twenty-something, with shoulder length greasy brown hair always hidden under a flat brimmed baseball hat, is lucky that he’s Scott brother. In addition to his job as a server at Harrisonburger, he is also a part-time weed dealer, he’s also lucky that both of his jobs occur in the same building. He sells his stash mostly to fellow employees in between serving tables, occasionally one of his regulars will pop in for a fix and be forced to order a burger in addition. However, many times his days are less productive than this, where he will sloppily serve a couple tables before getting buzzed at the bar to kick his hangover, for free, which has left Emily to cover his tables on several occasions.

A suspended license, thanks to his DUI, poses no issue for Kyle's drug business. Scott, brother and boss of the year, will drive him into work for the sole purpose of dealing.

Standing at the servers station in the corner of the dining room, Kyle will get to work. With his back turned to the majority of the dining room, in an attempt to hide his activities from the diners that are present, he pulls out his scale. He then pulls out the weed, and weighs it to separate it into grams, and eighths of an ounce, before closing them into little ziplocs. Hopefully a customer, a customer of Harrisonburger that is, has never seen him do this, but that seems unlikely.

Scott himself occasionally shows up high, probably from his brother's supply, to either just hang out or to bartend. Whenever he has to help a department out, like bartend or work in the kitchen, he's high, guaranteed, and terrible at the job. He has served customers the wrong drinks, broken plates, and gotten too frazzled at having "too much to do," that he'll just leave, but not before throwing a fit. During these fits of rage, he'll typically yell at any nearby employees, Emily included, just to magically forget it all the next day when his high wears off. Once, while high, he dropped an entire bowl of quinoa in the middle of the full dining room, and proceeded to stand there and yell at the employees for not immediately cleaning up the pile of quinoa and broken glass. Emily finally swooped in, after no one else would, and carefully and painstakingly picked up each piece of broken glass and each grain of quinoa as her customers grew impatient at their tables. Another day while under the influence, he yelled at Emily until the tears building in her eyes poured out rapidly, all because she thought that customers couldn't order two patties on a burger. He later forced her to expose her tear stained face to the customers

that were not at all upset, and to force her to buy the customers' burger out of her own paycheck, despite the customers insisting she didn't have to.

Despite Scott's blatant support of Kyle's drug dealing on shift and on property, he remains strict regarding his employee's use of drugs.

A line cook's face broke out with acne one day, and Scott was suspicious, "are you high on meth right now? Have you smoked meth recently?" Without testing the cook, he was forced to take a two month long, unpaid leave of absence for alleged meth use.

Additionally, Scott still adamantly refuses to hire any more college students, fearing that they will do everything and anything that Kyle is already doing with no consequences.

Welcome back to Harrisonburger, a restaurant that cares more about it's petty drug business than the treatment and safety of their employees, a restaurant that cares more about the bottom line than anything, a restaurant that views a sexual harasser as "harmless." But at least their burgers have won a couple of awards!

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Since most waitresses are paid around \$2-3 an hour (Emily is paid \$2.15), tips are their real source of income. So in order to salvage a worthy tip, many waitresses are forced to put up with the overly common mistreatment.

Emily and many other waitresses are subsequently forced to decide between earning tips, and standing up for themselves to horrible customers who deserve to be made aware of how they can make people feel like objects for simply doing their job. A decision between earning the money they deserve, and earning the self respect they inherently deserve. Emily said, "if he [the seventy year old man] even bought something, paid for it and tipped me, I would probably

accommodate him, accommodate all the creepy stuff, just because I need money.” Ultimately, the choice to earn the tips to survive prevails, but not without slowly cracking someone’s self esteem and self respect.