

Her Last Two Meals

My birthday is May 17th. This day happened exactly one month after my birthday. June 17th. Which happened to be my best friend Courtney's birthday. (This is important) It was a Sunday. (This is also important). Courtney and I started working as waitresses at a retirement community that January, so we hadn't worked there long. The community was really nice. They had their own grocery store (Even though they had an actual store around the corner that I would eventually go work at) and their own salon. The game room was bigger than my house. We would do to-go orders at the community and you literally had to carry a map. It was that big. The monthly cost to live there was more than my parent's mortgage. The ambulance and police came a lot. A lot of old people had accidents and the majority died there. It was the place that called 9-1-1 the most in my town. On Courtney and I's first day it was also another old lady's first day and we thought that she would be our best friend. She wasn't. She preferred the waiters but we still liked her. She pooped her pants once and announced it to the entire dining room. We liked a few old people, Mr. Dixon, the doctor (we never learned his name), Claudia, and a few others. So I guess it wasn't all bad. My favorite was Mary. This story is about Mary.

During the school year on the days that Courtney and I worked, because we always worked together, Courtney would ride home from school with me. We would enter the house and throw our bags in the corner of my room. Courtney would use the big upstairs bathroom I shared with my sister and I would use the bathroom downstairs (We call it the rose bathroom because it's all red and the mirror has roses on it) and we would dain our all blacks. We never put on our aprons till we actually got to work because they were too uncomfortable. We would then meet in the kitchen and I would cook us a snack. When we were done my father would pile us in the 10-year-old van and go drop us off at work. 4 o'clock.

We always ran in because we were always late and the sign-in computer never recognized my finger, 2017 technology was not it. Working sucked because old people smell and mumble and can't take any type of spice in their food. (Not to be stereotypical or anything but almost everyone in this community was white and over the age of 75 so it kind of made sense but it was still annoying. I got a complaint about the pepper in the mashed potatoes once. *Black Pepper*) The dining room closed at 6 o'clock and Courtney and I would rush to get our closing duties done while we gossiped about our day at school. (Who was dating who, who broke up with who, who embarrassed themselves, who was pregnant, who was on drugs, the usual) When the clock would strike 7, just like Cinderella, we had to rush to get out. (laws or something) We were only allowed to work a certain amount of hours and only so late on school days. The community never went over hours because Courtney and I were 15 at the time and they didn't want to risk getting in trouble. And that's how most of our work days went. Courtney was in color guard and she usually had practice on Saturdays and so she never got scheduled, which means I never got scheduled. Sunday shifts were 8-hour shifts because the dining hall was only open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.. Sunday's breakfast was also a buffet so you didn't do much in the morning anyway. That day was also reserved for people who could only work weekends or full-time employees. Courtney and I would get our hours done during the weekdays and so we *never* worked Sundays. It was nice, for me at least. But this week was different. This *day* was different.

June 17th. I would have spent the day with Courtney but her parents took her and her brother on a trip for her birthday. Courtney hated her family so I felt bad for her but what could I do? I wasn't scheduled to work Sunday, because I never work Sundays, and so I planned a nice day of starting a video game and then an hour in being yelled at by my mother that I was lazy and then fill the rest of my day with chores and the occasional fight with my sister. Not Wenny

because she was only 11 and literally the cutest kid ever but definitely Kirhyn because she was a stuck-up 18-year-old going on about how I should worship the ground she walks on because she was going to college in two months. I didn't. Those plans never actually happened though. At 9 am I received a call from my boss Diamond. It went like this.

“Hello?” I answered grogley (she woke me up)

“Can you come in today?”

“What?”

“Can you come in today? Timm called out.” (No that is not a typo, his name is actually Timm with two ms. We ridiculed him relentlessly for it. We would call him either “Timm with two mms” or “Timmmmm” dragging out the m for as long as we could.)

“I reached my hours this week,” I responded more alert now that I was awake

“You're sixteen now right?” she asked

“Yes”

“Well, then you can work overtime now. It'll be time and a half for eight hours. That's a lot of money for you.” She responded, her tone getting more urgent. I thought about it and decided that I would rather serve old people and get money than do chores for nothing.

“Yeah. Okay, I can come in. But I've never worked Sundays before. I don't know how it works.”

I was fully awake and walking around my room by now.

“It's fine. Britney will show you around. See you in an hour.” She abruptly hung up. I had no idea who Britney was.

Lots of things were different that day. The first was that I drove myself. I had gotten my driver's license two weeks prior. (I got a 96 on the test even though the man helped me with parallel parking and I never went over 30 mph.) My mother nor father wanted to drive me so

they let me take “The Green Machine”, which was my 2001 Honda Accord that I would have until 2022. It was a sad day when it got sold. When I arrived at the retirement community I realized I had absolutely no idea where to park. I had always been dropped off. I parked the car in front of the building with my hazards on and ran inside weaving through old people piling into a bus for a “field trip”. (They would just go to the mall or to Target. I don’t really think you can count that as a field trip.) When I reached the front desk, there was a stranger in Betty’s seat. Betty was the receptionist that we would always chat with and would help me with the fingerprint computer. I walked up to this random person realizing that today would be full of strangers. I asked her where to park and she directed me to the back parking lot and gave me a passcode for the gate but not before asking me a great many questions about whether I worked there or not. (I still to this day cannot comprehend why a random person would show up in an all-black outfit and offer to work for free at a retirement community.) I returned to my car and entered the back parking lot. While I was finding a spot I was desperately trying to remember where I came from. I was not going to be later than I was. I finally found a spot next to the *only* dumpster for the building. (My car smelled like shit for weeks.) I parked and ran retracing the “steps” of my car back to the main building.

When I entered the dining room I was already exhausted from trying to figure out the fingerprint computer without Betty. I stalked back to the kitchen as I looked curiously at the buffet spread. (It was set up really weird. I’m not sure how to explain what was wrong with it. I am sure if you just think of a messed up buffet table then you got the jist of it.) When I entered the two swing doors I was again met with strangers. So many strangers. (Well more like 3 or 4 but there were usually 5 or 6 servers so it was the majority of people.) Luckily I knew Sam. I walked up to Sam and the girl next to him while they were folding silverware and asked if

Britney was around. "That's me!" The girl next to Sam responded. "Oh. Hi! My name is Hayven. Diamond said you could show me what to do since I have never worked Sunday before." I smiled and waited for instructions. She looked me up and down and then turned to Sam and then to the silverware and then to the clock (she took an abnormally long time to respond) before she said "Breakfast will be over soon and then we clean and then it's like normal so for now let's just have you roll silverware with Sam." I nodded and made my way next to Sam. I stayed there for a while chatting with Sam. (I learned that Britney is his sister which was just one crazy piece of gossip I would later tell Courtney.)

Once lunch began everything was basically back to normal. I was running around taking orders and getting yelled at by Jon (He was the chef and yelled at everyone for literally nothing. I got yelled at for using the sink once. It was a toxic work environment.) I had the back wall of tables which was pretty normal for me which was nice. It consisted of one two-seat table, three four-seat tables, and one community table, a large 8 seat table where anyone could sit. The community table was my least favorite table because everyone sat down at a different time and some things it was hard to keep track of but some of my favorite old people sat there so it made up for it. Mary always sat there.

I don't know how long Mary had lived at the community but I knew it was at least since January. She wasn't very tall and walked around with a walker. She wore large rounded glasses that complimented her wrinkled face. Her hair was whiter than snow and she always had a hunch but the thing that made her stand out the most was the fact that she shook. Not like the occasional shiver when you are cold (Because old people are always cold) but a constant vibration of her body. I never learned why (I was too afraid to ask) but I like the mystery.

In the middle of the lunch rush, a smile crept onto my face as I watched Mary and Darla sit at my table. (She was cool too. She always let me choose her meal for her so I made sure she got the good stuff.) I walked over there and asked them what they would like to eat. The conversation went like this.

“Hi, Mary! Hi Darla! How are y'all?” I smiled while I pulled out my tickets and pen.

“Well, I am doing great!” Darla enthusiastically responded

“I am doing good as well,” Mary said

“What can I get for y'all today?” I asked, pen on the ticket ready to write

“I'll have water,” Darla said

“And I'll have tea,” Mary responded

“Great! And what would you like to eat?” I asked as I scribbled their drink orders down.

“Well you know” Darla stared at the menu (The menu had three meals on it. They changed every day but it was still only three. Not a lot to choose from.) “What's good?” (I said earlier that Darla always let me choose her meals which is true but not without acting like she was going to order on her own first.)

“I'm not sure, I haven't had any, but the shrimp smells good.” (Two things: I was not supposed to say that I had not had the meals but lying is bad for your skin and I was not about to risk getting a pimple and I can't quite remember what the three meals were. I remember one was seafood, one was chicken, and the other was some other type of meat. For the purposes of this story it will be shrimp, chicken, and turkey.)

“I don't know” Darla continued staring at the menu before promptly setting it down. “Why don't you choose for me? You are so good at that.”

I smiled. It's a little strange to be complimented on your ability to choose one of three meals but a compliment is a compliment and I will take it.

"Alright, I promise I will make it good." I turned to Mary. "And what would you like?"

Mary stared at the menu and like Darla set it down. "I think I will just have whatever my new friend Darla is having."

I gave them a nod, picked up their menus, and walked back to the kitchen. I grabbed their drinks and when delivering them reassured them that the food would be the best that we had to offer. (Which in my opinion wasn't even that good.) The rest of my tables were already on dessert or had left so I had time to really decide which of the three meals was the best. All the meals we served were frozen and from this place called Cotsco (Not CoSTco, CoTScO) and so it was really up in the air whether or not it would be edible, let alone good. I stared at the food from the other side of the table through the heating rack. The chicken is always dry, even if you drown it in sauce. That's a no-go. Same with the turkey. Shrimp it is. I love shrimp so I probably would have chosen that anyway, it was the most fresh. Well as fresh as frozen could be.

I brought the meals to their tables after a few minutes and wished them a good meal. They asked me about my summer and I asked them about movie night. (The community had its own movie theater and had a movie night every Friday. Most of the old people went because they got free popcorn and wine.) After pleasantries, I returned to the kitchen and started on my cleaning duties. Diamond approached me after a few minutes and sent me on my lunch break. We had to sign out for lunch breaks so on my way out of the dining hall I stopped by Mary and Darla and asked whether or not they would like dessert. They politely declined and wished me a good lunch. I left with a smile on my face and the thoughts of a good sandwich.

For lunch, I usually walked to the grocery store bought a pre-packaged cold sandwich, and ate it in the Starbucks sitting area while slurping down a venti coffee. When I finished I made my way back to the community. The walk is really nice, I basically live in the woods so the trees create a nice arc around the sidewalk. (When I was little my friends and I would pretend it was a portal to a fantasy land or an arch for a wedding.) The sidewalk borders the street so you can see where you are going through the foliage. When I turned the corner to the road the community is on I saw an ambulance leaving, lights and sirens and all. I thought to myself “Must be another old person” (It’s a little insensitive but you get used to it) and carried on.

I was late back from lunch because again I had trouble with the fingerprint computer and the Betty wannabe wouldn’t help. No one seemed to mind though. Dinner went on as usual. I was a few hours into the dinner and we were teetering on closing when Mary and Darla walked into the dining hall. Mary had a nurse with her which I didn’t think much of as most of the old people had nurses accompany them. They sat at the community table again and I went up to them and asked what they would like to eat. The conversation went like this.

“Hi, Mary! Hi Darla!” I turned to the nurse. “Hello! How are y’all?”

“Well, I am doing great!” Darla responded

“I am okay.” Mary said

“What can I get for y’all today?” I asked, pen on the ticket ready to write

“I’ll have water,” Darla said

“And I’ll have tea,” Mary responded

I looked to the nurse and she shook her head signaling she wasn’t going to order. I turned my attention back to the older ladies.

“Great! And what would you like to eat?” I asked as I scribbled their drink orders down.

“Well you know” Darla stared at the menu “What’s good?”

“I’m not sure, I haven’t had any, but the vegetables smell good.” (The three meals change from breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Again I don’t really remember what there was to eat so for the purposes of this story it will be vegetables, pork, and chicken, they always had chicken.)

“I don’t know” Darla continued staring at the menu before promptly setting it down. “Why don’t you choose for me? You are so good at that.”

“Alright, I promise I will make it good.” I turned to Mary. “And what would you like?”

Mary stared at the menu and like Darla set it down. “I think I will just have whatever Darla is having.”

“That’ll be right right out.” I grabbed the menus and left to get the drinks. (I know that this conversation is basically the same as before but old people are repetitive. I swear on my life that I had this exact conversation with them every single time.)

Just like before I went to the kitchen and ended up deciding on vegetables for them. They refused dessert again. I wished them a good evening and made my way back to the kitchen for closing duties. They were the last to leave. Sam and I cleaned the dining room together. Sam always knew what was happening around the community so I asked him who was in the ambulance. He said he didn’t know and would let me know tomorrow after he asked around. I nodded. In the middle of refilling the salt, I heard sirens and shuffling in the hall. (Someone else was probably hurt) I turned to Sam and he said before I even asked “I’ll let you know tomorrow.” The evening went on as usual and I drove home.

June 18th. I picked Courtney up at her house and we talked about her trip all the way to work and all the way into the building and all the way into the kitchen. It was before dinner at this point so Courtney and I started rolling silverware. Sam walked up to me with a grim look on

his face. He told me he had news. I nodded my head for him to go on. The conversation went like this.

“I know what happened yesterday,” Sam said eerily

“Okay,” I said

There was a beat of silence.

“Well, what happened?” I asked

“Mary passed away,” Sam said softly (He knew I had a soft spot for her.)

“Oh,” I was stunned. (It’s weird to see someone be absolutely fine and then in the span of hours they just don’t exist anymore.) “What about the first ambulance?”

“It’s weird,” Sam said

“Go on” Courtney interjected

“It was also Mary”

“What?” Courtney and I asked in unison

“Apparently Mary died after lunch and the ambulance came to get her. They resuscitated her on the way to the hospital. She got checked up and then came back but she died again after dinner and this time for real.”

Courtney and I just stared at him. This was the craziest thing I had ever heard.

“You’re joking,” I said

“No, I’m dead serious. No pun intended” Sam chuckled a little (Insensitive I know) “I gotta go.” and he left

I turned back to rolling the silverware. I had served Mary lunch and then she died, came back to life, and then I served her dinner and she died for real. I was oblivious the whole day. I

never even knew. I served Mary both of her last meals and I didn't even know. Had I served other people their last meals too?