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WAITER RANT

THANKS FOR THE TIP—
CONFESSIONS OF
A CYNICAL WAITER

by THE WAITER

THANK YOU!

"The front-of-the-house version of *Kitchen Confidential*; a painfully funny, excruciatingly true account of the waiter's life. You will never look at your waiter the same way again—and will never tip less than 20%."

—ANTHONY BOURDAIN

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**THANKS FOR THE TIP—
CONFESSIONS OF A CYNICAL WAITER**

T H E W A I T E R

*THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER, MY FATHER,
AND EVERYONE WHO'S EVER WAITED TABLES.*

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Preface

I'm a waiter. I bring food to tables in exchange for tips. At first glance it seems like a simple job. Just be neat, polite, display some salesmanship, and don't forget to smile. Easy, right?

What world are you living in?

Today waiters are expected to be food-allergy specialists, sommeliers, cell-phone-rule enforcers, eye candy, confessors, entertainers, mixologists, emergency medical technicians, bouncers, receptionists, joke tellers, therapists, linguists, punching bags, psychics, protocol specialists, and amateur chefs. Foodie-porn TV programming has generated a new class of entitled customers with already overblown culinary expectations and a rapidly diminishing set of social graces. Economists say that the restaurant business is a bellwether of the nation's economic health—but I think it's a bellwether of America's mental health as well. And let me tell you, 20 percent of the American dining public are socially maladjusted psychopaths. We should start putting Prozac in the Perrier.

Ordering from a waiter is one of the most-taken-for-granted human experiences in modern life. We're never more ourselves than when eating out with family and friends. While engaging in the basic rituals of breaking bread, we become a lot less guarded

and a lot more primitive. Thinking that the waiter is a powerless tip slave, customers often direct that primitiveness toward the person trying to take their order. Waiting should be a simple job, but it isn't. It's not all gloom and doom, though. If you keep your eyes open, you'll see the occasional crumb of human grace fall from the table. Eighty percent of my customers are the nicest people you'd ever want to meet. But I'm concerned that the percentage of people who know how to act in a restaurant is diminishing at an exponential rate.

For the last four years I've been anonymously chronicling my restaurant exploits at a Web site called Waiter Rant. From my server station at a white-tablecloth restaurant called "The Bistro," I've written about the joys and pains of working in the food-service industry. Staying anonymous has let me freely chronicle my customers' bad behavior without fear of retribution and bad tips, but it's also allowed me to talk about people behaving beautifully, too. I've been fortunate that my writing has attracted millions of readers, won a few awards, and grabbed a little bit of that crazy stuff called quasi-fame. Despite all the attention I've received, very few people know who I am or where The Bistro is located. After three years I was confronted by a customer only *once*.

This book is a natural outgrowth of Waiter Rant. In addition to dishing about insane customers, tyrannical owners, and drugged-up servers, I also hope to give you a real "pain in your bones" sense of what it's like to be a waiter in America today. After you read this book I doubt you'll ever look at your server the same way again. And maybe you'll learn how to be a better customer in the process.

So how did I end up becoming a waiter? Why did I start writing about the restaurant industry? If I'm ranting about it all the time, why don't I just quit and get another job? Just who the hell do I think I am?

As with all good stories, let's begin at the beginning.

Amici's

So, you take it up the ass?" Benny asks me.

"What kind of question is that?" I reply.

"You're a fag," the chubby Mexican says, glancing slyly at his coworkers. "We all know you are. It's okay You can tell us."

"Benny . . ."

"C'mon. We know you're queer."

No, I'm not being set upon by a gang of amorous inmates in a prison laundry. It's 1999, and I'm in the kitchen of Amici's, a two-hundred-seat Italian restaurant located in a hyper-affluent New York suburb. Two weeks ago I was fired from my job as marketing rep for a psychiatric health care company. Facing immediate penury, I asked my brother, a longtime waiter at Amici's, to get me a job so I could keep eating. As a thirty-one-year-old baby waiter learning the ropes, I'm quickly discovering that the hot topic of kitchen conversation is figuring out which waiter's gay and discussing the merits of inserting foreign objects into other people's rectal cavities. Ah, restaurant kitchens—they're all about tequila, buggery, and the lash.

"Why you want to know, Benny?" I ask. "You interested in me?"

"Me?" Benny says, untangling a wad of half-cooked spaghetti with his bare hands. "I'm no *maricón*."

“You’re asking a guy you don’t know whether or not he’s gay. Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“No,” Benny says, staring at me blankly. “I just want to know if you take it up the ass.”

I guess Benny’s never heard of the “fear is the wish” thing.

“I don’t take it up the butt,” I reply, a half smile playing on my lips. “But your wife does. Tell her I said hi.”

The kitchen guys start whooping with laughter.

“Oh shit!” the grill man hoots.

“He got you, yo,” the dishwasher says.

“*Pendejo*,” Benny says, his face reddening.

“It’s not my fault you can’t make you’re wife happy,” I say, rapidly egressing the area. Benny *does* have access to sharp knives.

“Screw you, *pendejo*!” Benny shouts after me.

“Right back at you,” I shout over my shoulder. “*Bitch*.”

After reading about this exchange you might be thinking I’m some kind of misogynistic homophobe. You’d be wrong. I’m merely engaging in a legitimate act of restaurant self-defense. My brother gave me an invaluable piece of advice when I started working at Amici’s: never take flak from the kitchen lying down. “You’re always gonna get shit from the cooks,” he warned. “But if you just sit there and take it, they’ll run right over you.” That’s why I brought it to Benny. Most waiters would get killed if they brought it to a cook in front of his crew like I did, but I’m not worried that my exchange with Benny is going to cause any problems. He’s a tough hombre who, unlike many cooks, can dish it out *and* take it. Besides, we actually have the makings of a friendship going on. Benny teaches me little kitchen tricks, like how not to cut off my fingers when I slice the cheese, and I help him with the occasional English words he doesn’t understand. Of course, Benny wants to know about only the weird words. Yesterday he asked me what *pederast* meant. I never should have told him. He kept trying to use the word in a sentence all day.

But getting into a profanity pissing contest with the kitchen crew can take you only so far. If a waiter wants respect from the back of the house, he or she has to show respect in return. And the best way to do that is to understand that kitchen staff and waiters are like the Palestinians and Israelis—separate and distinct nationalities uncomfortably sharing the same volatile piece of real estate.

A big difference between waiters and cooks is the hours they work. Waiters usually work an eight- or nine-hour shift and go home. The kitchen guys, however, are often the first to show up and the last to go home. Fourteen-hour days are common. When a restaurant closes its doors for the night, you'll probably find half its servers getting blasted at a nearby bar. But you'll find the kitchen guys sharing a taxi or waiting at a bus stop for a public transportation ride home. Because most fine-dining establishments are located in neighborhoods where residential rents are high, kitchen personnel seldom can afford to live close to their place of employment. That means they often have a very long commute to and from work. One of Amici's prep cooks buses it from Queens every day. Depending on traffic, that can be a three-hour round-trip six days a week—*on top* of working a fourteen-hour shift. The waiters at Amici's (at least the ones without DUIs) have cars and shorter commutes. They have free time. This disparity in leisure hours often leads to resentment between the front and back of the house. At the end of the night the exhausted kitchen guys just want to go home to enjoy what little free time they have left.

Because they're often exhausted, I'm learning it's in my best interest not to make the cooks work any harder than they have to. That means not running into the kitchen and begging the grill man to cook me a new steak because a customer wanted a medium-rare filet mignon and I mistakenly ordered it well done. It's also good not to inflame the resentments constantly simmering between the front and back of the house by acting like an arrogant prick. While kitchen guys usually work at a single location

for years, waiters tend to be a more nomadic lot. Cooks see the waiters come and go, so, in their minds, they're the stable nucleus at the core of the restaurant. Waiters consider themselves the public face of the restaurant—hustling to generate the revenue that pays everyone's salaries, including the cooks'. Many waiters view themselves as elite frontline troops while dismissing the cooks as mere logistical support. Couple this attitude with the fact that waiters usually make more money, work fewer hours, and perform less physically intensive labor, and you'll understand why the kitchen occasionally wants to run a mouthy server through the industrial-strength dishwasher.

The kitchen guys will manifest their displeasure by screwing up servers' orders, subjecting them to a stream of verbal abuse, or threatening impromptu sexual-reassignment surgery with a meat cleaver. I've met several waiters who have at least one knife-throwing-chef story in their repertoire. The servers at Amici's aren't saints either. Always shifting blame for their screw-ups onto the kitchen, they act like the cooks are dirty *hoi polloi* unfit to tie the servers' shoes. They respond to the kitchen staff's taunting with juicy comebacks laden with lovely adjectives like *wet-back*, *sand nigger*, and *Eurotrash*.

When peaceful coexistence develops between the front and back of the house, it's because there's a good executive chef or general manager at the helm. By making everyone realize that they're in a symbiotic relationship, that cook and waiter in the long term need each other, good management can be like Jimmy Carter at Camp David, brokering a cease-fire between historical enemies.

Unfortunately, Sammy, the manager at Amici's, is a good example of how not to run a restaurant. A short fat Syrian man with the demeanor of a smug cherub, Sammy's a verbally abusive, power-mad sexual deviant—traits not uncommon in restaurant managers. Underpaid and aggravated that the waitstaff takes home more money than he does, Sammy extorts the servers into paying him bribes. Want to work on the lucrative Friday and Sat-

urday shifts? Switch a shift? Take a vacation? Sammy's response is to hold out his hand and say, "Pay me." In addition to abusing his authority, Sammy, a married man with children, revels in making salacious comments to the female staff and spends most of his free time trying to get into their pants. He does little to encourage cooperation between the front and back of the house. In fact, I think he does his best to keep everyone fighting and off balance. "Divide and conquer" is Sammy's motto. All in all, he's a despicable little man.

Amici's head chef, Fluvio, hates Sammy's guts. Forty years old with long black hair tied into an aging hippie ponytail, Fluvio wears thick eyeglasses that are always smudged with grease, and his ample stomach seems incongruous on top of strong legs conditioned from years spent working on his feet. In addition to his native Italian, he's fluent in Spanish and speaks a good bit of Arabic and French. He runs a professional kitchen, but he's intimidated by Caesar, the manipulative and tyrannical owner who treats everyone who works for him like livestock. Caesar, an Italian raised in South America, acts like his restaurant's a nineteenth-century plantation on the Argentinean pampas. Expecting the kitchen staff to address him as "*patrón*," he has a penchant for calling the busboys "peasants" and the hostesses "whores."

Here's a typical example of Caesar's nonsense. Not liking his grease-splattered cooks using the patrons' bathrooms and offending the customers' delicate sensibilities, Caesar insists that everyone use the tiny windowless bathroom next to the deep fryer in the kitchen. That miserable bathroom's so small it would give Harry Houdini panic attacks. Technically, the waiters are supposed to use this bathroom, but none of us ever do. Half the cooks don't either. I'm not surprised. Rizzo, Amici's headwaiter, lovingly refers to the kitchen's hot, cramped, porn-decorated bathroom as the "phone booth of sodomy." After eyeballing that miserable toilet, I'm beginning to understand why the kitchen crew is so obsessed with my sexual orientation.

Leaving Benny and his sexually conflicted comrades behind,

I enter the trattoria's main dining room. It's only five o'clock on Saturday night, and the place is already filling up with customers. Influxes of bull-market nouveau riche transformed this formerly picturesque suburb into a gigantic outdoor shopping mall. Oozing with corporate-branded hipness, the town's countless rows of boutiques, restaurants, and art galleries ruthlessly compete with one another for the well-shod discretionary incomes of the yuppies prowling its streets. Situated in the heart of the town's retail district, Amici's sucks yuppies off the sidewalk like a black hole consuming dust from a dying star. Amici's has the three things any restaurant needs to survive—location, location, location.

"So you ready to rock and roll, newbie?" Rizzo, the headwaiter, asks me.

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

"You're gonna be busting your ass tonight. We're down two waiters."

"You mean there are only four of us taking care of two hundred people?"

"That's right."

"What happened?"

"Toomey and Giselle quit." Rizzo says. "They got sick of Sammy's shit."

"Four waiters have quit since I started."

"This place is a meat grinder, kid," Rizzo grunts. "You're the meat. Get used to it."

"Do you think I'll make it?"

"Probably not."

"Gee," I say. "Don't hold back. Speak your mind."

"It's nothing personal," Rizzo replies. "In the 'Nam I never bothered to learn the new guys' names. Why get close? They were gonna get killed anyway."

"How reassuring."

Rizzo stares at me. Gray-haired and rangy, with a build topping out at six feet two, the thirty years he's spent toiling in the

restaurant business are carved into the lines of his weathered face. If every restaurant has to have a stereotypical grizzled veteran, Rizzo is it. Like a bacterium living in acid or a tube worm eking out an existence next to heat vents several thousand leagues under the sea, Rizzo is the kind of waiter who thrives in hostile environments that would crush most servers. With calm black eyes peering out from behind a pair of rose-colored wire-rim spectacles, he looks like a cross between John Lennon and Leon, the hit man from Luc Besson's movie *The Professional*.

"You gave Sammy money to work tonight, didn't you?" he asks me.

"Yeah. Fifty bucks."

"That was dumb. Now he's gonna hit you up all the time."

"Don't you ever give him money?"

Rizzo peers at me over the top of his glasses. "Screw that," he says. "Don't forget. I used to own a restaurant. I know every illegal thing Sammy and Caesar ever pulled in this joint."

"So you know where all the bodies are buried."

"Indeed I do, son," Rizzo says. "And unless they want the IRS raiding the joint, they'll leave me the fuck alone."

Suddenly, there's a clatter of noise by the front entrance. A crowd of hungry-looking people surging through the front door is overwhelming the skinny girl at the hostess stand.

"Oh man," Rizzo groans. "Here comes the pain."

Before long the restaurant is rocking. It doesn't help that the anorexic crackhead hostess seats me two eight tops, three deuces, and a twenty-person wedding-rehearsal dinner inside half an hour. (In waiterspeak, a deuce or two top denotes a table of two. A four top is four people, a six top is six customers, and so on.) I get the two tops squared away quickly. Rizzo taught me to always take care of deuces first. His logic is that couples at a table are probably married and sick of talking to each other, making them hypersensitive to any kind of waiting.

Of course, I get slowed down by an eight top of little kids suffering from every food allergy known to man. I am beginning to

think yuppie parents lie to their offspring, telling them they're suffering from food allergies when they're actually not, hoping to con their hypercompetitive children into eating whatever trendy diet promises to help them grow into big, strong, overly self-esteemed junk bond traders.

"I want French fries!" one little brat yells in psychologically healthy protest.

"We have French fries, young man," I reply, trying to keep the smile from falling off my face.

"Dylan can't have French fries," his mother says. "He wants zucchini fries instead."

"We don't have zucchini fries, madam," I reply.

The soccer mom's surgically altered perky nose scrunches up. She looks at me like I've crawled out from under a rock.

"The waiter I had last time got them for us," she says.

I want to find "waiter I had last time" and snap his neck. This lady's eating into my precious time. I can feel the wedding party's eyes crawling up and down my back. They've been nibbling on bread and water for twenty minutes. I feel bad for them. If it was my rehearsal dinner, I'd be pissed, too. I've got to get over there.

"I'll ask the chef what we can do," I say.

"You do that," the woman snaps.

I run to the kitchen to ask Fluvio if he can make some zucchini fries.

"Get the fuck out of here!" he screams.

I return to the table. "I'm sorry, madam. The chef regrets that he cannot make zucchini fries."

"I want to speak to the manager," the woman barks.

The last person I want to deal with is Sammy. He'll probably want \$5 just to talk to this lady. To humor the woman, I disappear in the back to make it seem like I'm looking for the manager. After a minute I return to the kiddie table with the bad news.

"This is outrageous," the mother sputters.

"Madam—"

"We're leaving."

"Madam, I—"

"Waiter!" I hear a voice cry out from the wedding party. "Can we have some service over here?"

"Right away, sir!" I yelp.

I disengage from the zucchini-obsessed mommy and give some attention to the twenty top. They hand me two bottles of expensive champagne. That means I've got to scrounge up twenty champagne glasses and some ice buckets pronto. I race over to the coffee station where we store them.

"Minnie," I say to the cute Iranian girl who brews all the cappuccinos and espressos. "Do you have twenty champagne glasses?"

"Not clean ones."

"Can you help me, please?" I plead. "I'm in the weeds."

Being "in the weeds" (otherwise known as being "in the shit") is waiter lingo for what happens when the demands put on a server exceed his or her ability to fulfill them. This can happen when a waiter's new, incompetent, or placed in an impossible situation. For me it's all three.

"I'll help you," Minnie says, smiling.

"Hey, Ahmed," I call out to one of the busboys, "could you get me two ice buckets for table six?"

"Fuck you *sharmout*," Ahmed snarls, using the Arabic equivalent of *maricon*. I guess a waiter's sexual orientation is the subject of speculative interest among the bus people as well as the kitchen staff.

"*Elif air ab tizak!*" I shoot back. That's a nice way of saying "A thousand dicks your ass!"

Since Ahmed is virulently homophobic, my words hit home. As I watch him turn red I'm grateful I memorized a few Arabic comebacks. I was rehearsing that one for three days. When you work in a restaurant, you can never go wrong with remarks about anal penetration.

"Fuck you!" Ahmed repeats.

"Ahmed," I reply, "if you're gonna live in America, you've got to learn to say something besides 'Fuck you.'"

“Fuck you!” Ahmed yells, storming off.

“Wow,” Minnie says, as she steam cleans a glass. “You speak some Arabic?”

“Only the dirty words.”

“I’m impressed.”

I grab a bucket, fill it with ice and water, and drop a champagne bottle inside. Minnie runs ahead of me to put the champagne glasses on the table.

The rehearsal party’s table is set up like a long rectangle with nine people on each side. The bride and groom are seated cutely next to each other at the far end of the table. As I approach, Ahmed sneaks up behind me and slams into my back. The ice bucket I’m holding slips out of my hands and crashes onto the table. The champagne bottle shoots out of the bucket like a torpedo firing out of a submarine. It smashes down the length of the table—targeting the bride-to-be’s bosom.

“Oh shit!” I cry out.

The slick bottle bounces off the bride’s boobs, hits the floor, and skitters off into oblivion. Everyone’s dripping with ice water. The bride’s expression transmutes from shock into pure rage.

“You idiot!” she screams.

Saying “I’m sorry” seems pointless, so I don’t. I turn around. Ahmed’s laughing smugly.

“Fuck you!” he mouths. “Fuck you!”

Sammy comes running over. Speaking rapid-fire Arabic, he orders Ahmed and the other busboys to reset the table. Before I can go looking for the champagne bottle, he grabs me by the elbow.

“You’re a moron,” Sammy hisses. “You better smooth things over with that table.”

“I’m a new waiter, and I’ve got forty customers,” I plead. “I need some help.”

Sammy looks at me coldly. “Sink or swim, motherfucker.”

I stare at Sammy in shock. I’ve worked for some real jerks in my time, but they’ve all been the smiling-on-the-outside/scumbag-on-the-inside types. Sammy’s a bastard up front.

"Fine," I say, yanking my arm out of his grasp. "I'll handle it."

A few seconds later, as I'm scurrying on my hands and knees looking for the errant bottle of bubbly, the owner decides to make an appearance.

"What the hell's happening here?" Caesar huffs.

At first glance, you can tell Caesar was once a handsome and powerfully built man. While the remnants of his youthful vigor occasionally peek out from inside his black eyes, you can tell the ravages of time and alcohol are pulling down the scaffolding of his once good looks. Vain for almost seventy years of age, Caesar decided to combat his thinning hair by shaving his head completely bare. A fastidious dresser to boot, today he's sporting a white silk shirt, a red silk tie, gray slacks, tasseled Italian shoes, and a double-breasted blue blazer. If he added a monocle to his ensemble, he'd look like a dissipated version of Colonel Klink.

"I'm looking for a champagne bottle I dropped on the floor," I reply. "It rolled under the tables somewhere."

"Smooth move," Caesar says. "Real good."

"Could you help me look for it?" I ask innocently. "I'm really pressed for time."

The owner's eyes retract into his skull. "You think I'm going to help you?" he hisses. "That's your job, *peasant*."

Behind me I hear a diner gasp. Suddenly I'm aware that I'm on my hands and knees before a man who thinks nothing of insulting the people who work for him right in front of his customers.

"Forget it, Caesar," I say. "I'll find it."

"*Stupido*," the owner says, walking away.

I continue to search for the bottle. It's disappeared. The rehearsal dinner's freaking out. To this day I think a customer at another table stole it. I dart out of the restaurant and run to a nearby liquor store. They have the same champagne at eighty bucks a bottle. I put it on my credit card and run back inside.

The table's so touched that I bought a replacement bottle with my own money that they calm down. I get a grip on my section and bring everything under control. When the dust clears, the

rehearsal party leaves me a \$200 tip. They were nice people. Even after spending eighty bucks on the champagne and tipping out the bus people, I'll still make a small profit.

Finally the night ends. The other waiters and I assemble at a back table and drink cheap white wine out of pint glasses while we wait for Sammy to accept our cash-out—the money and credit card receipts we accumulated during our shift. Sammy, being a petty tyrant, won't let any of the waiters leave the restaurant until everyone's cash-out matches to the penny. At the end of every shift, Sammy always eats a dish of vanilla ice cream dripping with chocolate sauce. He won't even look at our receipts until he finishes. Deliberately lingering over his dessert to remind us of his importance, Sammy's end-of-the-night shenanigans usually tack twenty minutes onto an already long day.

"C'mon, Sammy," my brother moans. "I've been here all day, and I want to go home. Stop stuffing your face."

"Just for that, I take care of you last," Sammy says, smiling mischievously into his ice cream.

"Screw this," my brother says, tossing his paperwork next to Sammy's dish of ice cream. "I'm going outside to have a cigarette. Call me when you're done."

"Suit yourself," Sammy chuckles.

"Wait," I tell my brother, grabbing my Marlboro Lights. "I'll go with you."

"Sit down," Sammy says. "I didn't say you can leave."

"What is this, Sammy?" I reply hotly. "The military?"

"Kind of," Sammy snorts.

"What do you want?"

"Caesar was pissed you messed up that table's champagne," Sammy says, once my brother's out of earshot.

"Hey, I bought a new bottle with my own money."

"Doesn't matter," Sammy says, shaking his head. "Caesar told me to give the bride a hundred-dollar gift certificate out of your money."

"What?" I gasp. The price of the champagne combined with buying this woman a gift certificate means I'll have worked this entire hellish day practically for free.

"That's the deal," Sammy says. "It's out of my hands."

"Goddamnit."

"There's another thing," Sammy says, an avaricious glint forming in his eye.

"What?"

"Caesar wanted me to fire you. I didn't out of respect for your brother."

"Thanks."

"So give me fifty bucks."

"Are you kidding?" I ask. "You want another bribe?"

"It's not a bribe. Let's say it's a gift—for my birthday."

"No fucking way. Fire me if you want. No more bribes."

Sammy looks at me, a cautiously surprised expression on his face.

"Suit yourself, newbie," he says. "Suit yourself."

When I get home at two A.M., there's a message from Sammy on my answering machine. He's taken away all my lucrative dinner shifts and replaced them with a motley assortment of low-revenue lunch gigs. To add insult to injury, he's making me work Sunday brunch tomorrow. That means I have to be back at work in seven hours. As I toss and turn in bed, anxious because I know I'm returning to that hellhole, one question keeps looping through my mind.

How the hell did I end up becoming a waiter?

The Sacred and the Profane

Honestly? I never thought I'd be a waiter when I was in my thirties. When I was eighteen years old, I dreamed about becoming a Catholic priest. According to the life schedule I had mapped out for myself, I was to be ordained a priest at twenty-five, consecrated a bishop at thirty, inducted into the Sacred College of Cardinals at forty, and assume the Throne of Peter to universal acclaim soon after that. I even had my pontifical name picked out. I'll bet I was the only teenager in the Northeast doodling prospective versions of his papal coat of arms in his notebook to keep from falling asleep in physics class. I was a religious geek.

If the thirty-one-year-old me could travel back to 1986 and tell that pimply-faced kid that he'd be working in a restaurant asking "You want *pommes frites* with that?" instead of running the archdiocese of New York, I'm fairly certain that kid would have broken out bell, book, and candle and singlehandedly tried to cast my unclean spirit into hell. Let's just say that being a waiter wasn't in that kid's plans.

Full of theistic fervor, I began my assault on the Vatican by enrolling in a college seminary—an undergraduate program designed to prepare young men for the priesthood. Operated under

the auspices of a major Catholic university, my college campus was sandwiched between an affluent suburb and a decaying, poverty-stricken city.

The seminary was an interesting place. Intellectually stimulating and emotionally gut-wrenching, it was one of the most formative experiences of my life. While the other kids on campus were getting stoned, having sex, and basically having a great time, I was absorbing the arcane language of metaphysics, learning how to comfort people in times of sorrow, and immersing myself in the life of the Church. I spent so much time praying in chapel that my seminary mates whispered that I was a mystic. There was talk that I'd be sent to Rome for theological studies. My bishop said I was destined for great things. I was an ecclesiastical up-and-comer. I was also a self-righteous little shit.

Girls were verboten, but that was okay because I was afraid of them anyway. Since I was planning to dedicate my life to God, I did my best to avoid the inconsiderately buxom sources of temptation buzzing around campus in their tight T-shirts, leg warmers, and big hair. But biology always trumps theology, and by the end of my freshman year I was madly in puppy love with a co-ed named Gwen. Since I was in the seminary and ignorant of women, the relationship flamed out quickly. I was devastated. The first time your heart is broken is always the worst. I eventually got over it.

The seminary ended up breaking my heart, too. Don't get me wrong, I've always thought the priesthood was full of good men trying to make a genuine difference in the world. I still do. But as my time in the seminary wore on, it became obvious that the institution was also a hiding place for emotionally stunted head cases. While most of the priests I met were men struggling to do the right thing within an imperfect system, I also met quite a few individuals who used the priesthood as a home base for their sexual acting out—gay or straight. When the sexual abuse scandal rocked the Church in the late 1990s, I wasn't surprised at all. Years of bad karma and church politics were simply coming

home to roost. The chasm between the ideal of what I thought the priesthood should be and what it actually was ended up being too much. When I got older, I began to realize the Church doesn't have a monopoly in the hypocrisy and stupidity department. It's everywhere. But since I didn't have the experience back then to give me a sense of perspective, I got angry. That anger coupled with the realization that celibacy wasn't a viable lifestyle choice caused me to leave the seminary after I completed my fourth year of undergraduate work. Studying theology in the Eternal City wasn't in the cards for me. That's just as well. By the time I had made up my mind to leave, the whole process had transformed me into such a cynical, bitter, angry person that my leaving saved Church officials the hassle of kicking me out.

Unlike most of my divinity school comrades, I didn't major in philosophy or religious studies. Some tiny realistic part of my brain knew I'd never be a priest and influenced me to get my degree in psychology. After I graduated from college I got a job working at a psychiatric and drug-rehabilitation facility that catered to the rich, famous, addicted, and confused.

Basically I was the guy in the proverbial white coat. My biggest job was to clap rich people in restraints whenever they engaged in self-harmful or violent behaviors and give them a chance to "take a time-out." (How I'd miss that option when I became a waiter!) Often we'd discover that the soft leather restraints the hospital used were missing. An internal investigation concluded that staff members were taking them home for kinky extracurricular activities. When we got them back, we would wash them in hot water. Twice.

When I wasn't busy hog-tying patients, escorting them to electroshock therapy, or going insane with boredom on interminable suicide watches, I played Ping-Pong in the staff room, liberated food from the cafeteria, and hit on the nurses. I also became tight with a group of perpetual frat-boy staffers who lived to go to the shore, play bad golf, ski, and lose their money in weekly poker games or trips to Atlantic City. Even though

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