

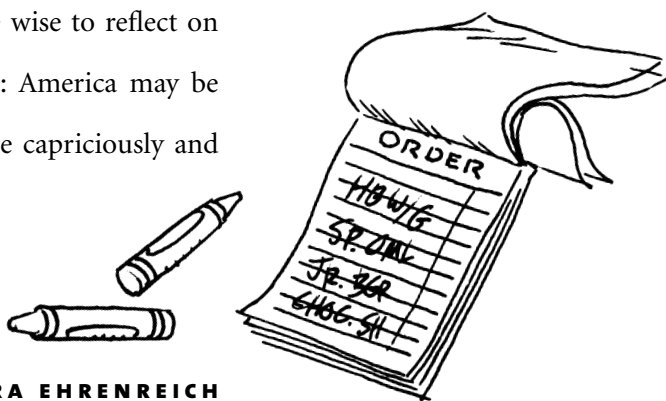
Nickel and Dimed

On (not) getting by in America

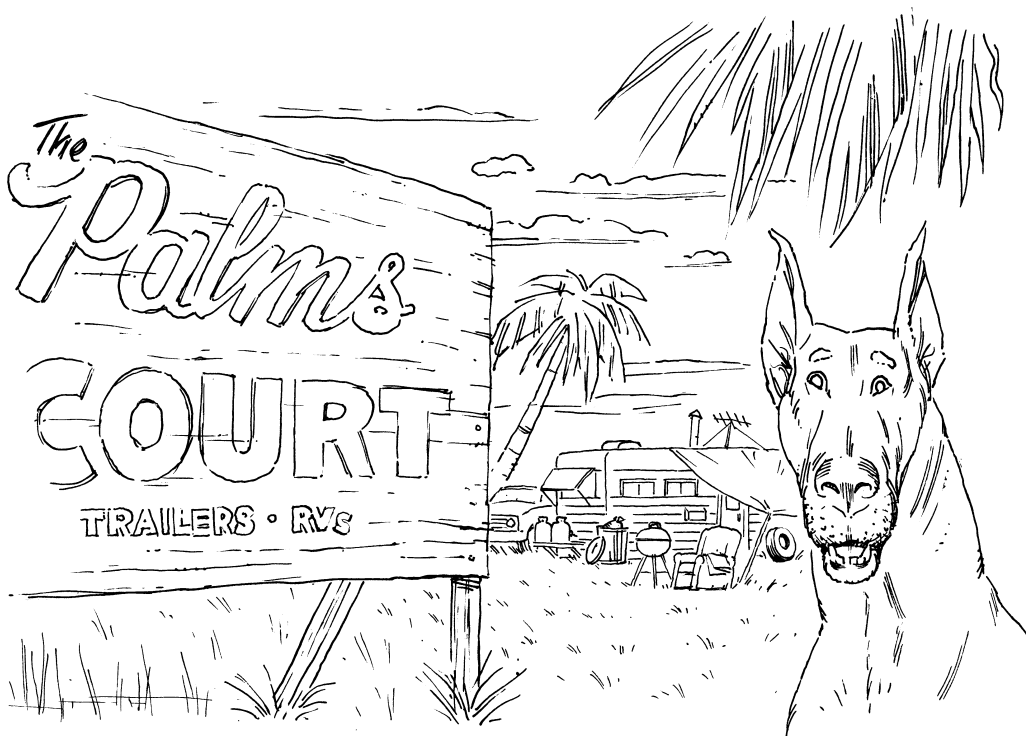
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FRED INGRAM

Barbara Ehrenreich, pundit from the left and author of the best-selling *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*

(Metropolitan Books),* is one of America's most reliable critics of the rich and powerful. But even those who are inclined to think too much of money and power have been heard to admit that Ehrenreich's political medicine goes down easy, thanks in large part to her delicious sense of humor and refreshing lack of self-importance. ¶ This excerpt from *Nickel and Dimed* chronicles her initial effort to live as an unskilled worker in contemporary America. A stunt? Sure. But those tempted to write it off as an exercise in bleeding-heart liberalism would be wise to reflect on the embarrassing truth it explores: America may be rich, but the fruits of its wealth are capriciously and unevenly distributed.



BY BARBARA EHRENREICH



Mostly out of laziness, I decide to start my low-wage life in the town nearest to where I actually live, Key West, Fla., which, with a population of about 25,000 is elbowing its way up to the status of a genuine city. The downside of familiarity, I soon realize, is that it's not easy to go from being a consumer, thoughtlessly throwing money around in exchange for groceries and movies and gas, to being a worker in the very same places. I am terrified, especially at the beginning, of being recognized by some friendly business owner or erstwhile neighbor and having to stammer out some explanation of my project. Happily, though, my fears turn out to be entirely unwarranted: during a month of poverty and toil, no one recognizes my face or my name, which goes unnoticed and for the most part unuttered. In this parallel universe, I am “baby,” “honey,” “blondie” and, most commonly, “girl.”

My first task is to find a place to live. I figure that if I can earn \$7 an hour – which, from the want ads, seems doable – I can afford to spend \$500 on rent or maybe, with severe economies, \$600, and still have \$400 or \$500 left over for food and gas. In the Key West area, this pretty much confines me to flophouses or trailer homes – like the one, a pleasing 15-minute drive from town, that has no air-conditioning, no screens, no fans, no television, and, by way of diversion, only the challenge of evading the landlord's Doberman pinscher. The big problem with this place, though, is the rent, which at \$675 a month is well beyond my reach. All right, Key West is expensive. Still, it is a shock to realize that trailer trash has become, for me, a demographic category to aspire to.

So I decide to make the common trade-off between affordability and convenience and go for a \$500-a-month efficiency 30 miles up a two-lane highway from the employment opportunities of Key West, meaning 45 minutes if there's no road construction and I don't get caught behind some sun-dazed Canadian tourists. I hate the drive, along a roadside studded with white crosses commemorating the more effective head-on collisions, but it leads to a sweet little place – a cabin, more or less, set in the swampy backyard of the converted mobile home where my landlord, an affable TV repairer, lives with his bartender girlfriend.

The next piece of business is to comb through the want ads and find a job. I rule out various occupations for one reason or another: hotel front-desk clerk, for example, which to my surprise is regarded as unskilled and pays only \$6 or \$7 an hour, gets eliminated because it involves standing in one spot for eight hours a day. Waitressing is also something I'd like to avoid, because I remember it leaving me bone-tired when I was 18, and I'm

decades of varicosities and back pain beyond that now. Telemarketing, one of the first refuges of the suddenly indigent, can be dismissed on grounds of personality. This leaves certain supermarket jobs, such as deli clerk, or housekeeping in the hotels and guest houses, which pays about \$7 and, I imagine, is not too different from what I've been doing part time, in my own home, all my life.

So I put on what I take to be a respectable-looking outfit of ironed Bermuda shorts and scooped-neck T-shirt and set out for a tour of the local hotels and supermarkets. Best Western, Econo Lodge, and HoJo's all let me fill out application forms, and these are, to my relief, mostly interested in whether I am a legal resident of the United States and whether I have committed any felonies. My next stop is Winn-Dixie, the supermarket, which turns out to have a particularly onerous application process, featuring a 20-minute interview by computer since, apparently, no human on the premises is deemed capable of representing the corporate point of view. I am conducted to a large room decorated with posters illustrating how to look professional (it helps to be white and, if female, permed) and warning about the slick promises that union organizers might try to tempt me with. The interview is multiple-choice: do I have anything, such as child-care problems, that might make it hard for me to get to work on time? Do I think safety on the job is the responsibility of management? Then, popping up cunningly out of the blue: how many dollars' worth of stolen goods have I purchased in the last year? Would I turn in a fellow employee if I caught him stealing? Finally, "are you an honest person?"

Apparently I ace the interview, because I am told that all I have to do is show up in some doctor's office tomorrow for a urine test. This seems to be a fairly general rule: if

you want to stack Cheerios boxes or vacuum hotel rooms in chemically fascist America, you have to be willing to squat down and pee in front of a health worker (who has no doubt had to do the same thing herself.) The wages Winn-Dixie is offering – \$6 and a couple of dimes to start with – are not enough, I decide, to compensate for this indignity.

I lunch at Wendy's, where \$4.99 gets you unlimited refills at the Mexican part of the Super-bar, a comforting surfeit of refried

able measure of the actual jobs available at any particular time. They are the employers' insurance policy against the relentless turnover of the low-wage work force. Most of the big hotels run ads almost continually, if only to build a supply of applicants to replace the current workers as they drift away or are fired. So finding a job is just a matter of being both in the right place at the right time and flexible enough to take whatever is being offered that day.

“That’s just Billy. He’s on the rag again” – a condition occasioned, in this instance, by the fact that the cook on the morning shift had forgotten to thaw out the steaks.

beans and cheese sauce. Then it's off for a round of the locally owned inns and guest houses in Key West's Old Town, which is where all the serious sightseeing and guzzling goes on, a couple of miles removed from the functional end of the island, where the discount hotels make their homes. At The Palms, let's call it, a bouncy manager actually takes me around to see the rooms and meet the current housekeepers, who, I note with satisfaction, look pretty much like me – faded ex-hippie types in shorts with long hair pulled back in braids. Mostly, though, no one speaks to me or even looks at me except to proffer an application form.

Three days go by like this and, to my chagrin, no one from the approximately 20 places at which I've applied calls me for an interview. I had been vain enough to worry about coming across as too educated for the jobs I sought, but no one even seems interested in finding out how overqualified I am. Only later will I realize that the want ads are not a reli-

This finally happens to me at one of the big discount-chain hotels where I go, as usual, for housekeeping and am sent instead to try out as a waitress at the attached family restaurant, a dismal spot looking out on a parking garage, which is featuring “Polish sausage and BBQ sauce” on this 95-degree day. Phillip, the dapper young West Indian who introduces himself as the manager, interviews me with about as much enthusiasm as if he were a clerk processing me for Medicare, the principal questions being what shifts I can work and when I can start. I mutter about being woefully out of practice as a waitress, but he's already on to the uniform. I'm to show up tomorrow wearing black slacks and black shoes; he'll provide the rust-colored polo shirt with Hearthside, as we'll call the place, embroidered on it, though I might want to wear my own shirt to get to work, ha ha.

So begins my career at the Hearthside, where for two weeks I work from 2 till 10 p.m. for \$2.43 an hour plus tips. Employees are

barred from using the front door, so I enter the first day through the kitchen, where a red-faced man with shoulder-length blond hair is throwing frozen steaks against the wall.

"That's just Billy," explains Gail, the wiry middle-aged waitress who is assigned to train me. "He's on the rag again" – a condition occasioned, in this instance, by the fact that the cook on the morning shift had forgotten to thaw out the steaks. For the next eight hours, I run after the agile Gail, absorbing bits of instruction along with fragments of personal tragedy. All food must be trayed, and the reason she's so tired today is that she woke up in a cold sweat thinking of her boyfriend, who was killed a few months ago in a scuffle in prison. No refills on lemonade. And the reason he was in prison is that a few DUIs caught up with him, that's all, could have happened to anyone. Carry the creamers to

the table in a monkey bowl, never in your hand. And after he was gone she spent several months living in her truck, peeing in a plastic bottle and reading by candlelight at night, but you can't live in a truck in the summer, since you need to have the windows down, which means anything can get in, from mosquitoes on up.

At least Gail puts to rest any fears I had of appearing overqualified. From the first day on, I find that of all the things that I have left behind, such as home and identity, what I miss the most is my competence. I am beset by requests as if by bees: more iced tea here, ketchup over there, a to-go box for table 14, and where are the high chairs, anyway? Of the 27 tables, up to 6 are usually mine at any time, though on slow afternoons or if Gail is off, I sometimes have the whole place to myself.

Then there is the touch-screen-computer



ordering system to master, which I suppose is meant to minimize server-cook contacts but in practice requires constant verbal fine-tuning: “That’s gravy on the mashed, OK? None on the meat loaf,” and so forth. And, something I had forgotten in the years since I was 18: about a third of a server’s job is side work invisible to customers – sweeping, scrubbing, slicing, refilling and restocking. If it isn’t all done, every little bit of it, you’re going to face the 6 p.m. dinner rush defenseless, and probably go down in flames. I screw up dozens of times at the beginning, sustained in my shame entirely by Gail’s support – “It’s OK, baby, everyone does that sometime” – because, to my total surprise and despite the scientific detachment I am doing my best to maintain, I care.

When I wake up at 4 a.m. in my own cold sweat, I am not thinking about the writing deadlines I’m neglecting; I’m thinking of the table where I screwed up the order and one of the kids didn’t get his kiddie meal until the rest of the family had moved on to their Key lime pies. That’s the other powerful motivation – the customers, or patients, as I can’t help thinking of them, on account of a mysterious vulnerability that seems to have left them temporarily unable to feed themselves. After a few days at Hearthside, I feel the service ethic kick in like a shot of oxytocin, the nurturance hormone. The plurality of my customers are hard-working locals – truck drivers, construction workers, even housekeepers from the attached hotel – and I want them to have the closest to a fine dining experience that the grubby circumstances will allow.

There is Benny, for example, a short, tight-muscled sewer repairman who cannot even think of eating until he has absorbed a half hour of air-conditioning and ice water. We chat about hyperthermia and electrolytes

until he is ready to order some finicky combination like soup of the day, garden salad, and a side of grits. There are the German tourists who are so touched by my pidgin “Wilkommen” and “Ist alles gut?” that they actually tip. (Europeans, no doubt spoiled by their trade-union-ridden, high-wage welfare states, generally do not know that they are supposed to tip. Some restaurants, the Hearthside included, allow servers to “grat” their foreign customers, or add a tip to the bill. Since this amount is added before the customers have a chance to tip or not tip, the practice amounts to an automatic penalty for imperfect English.)

At Hearthside, we utilize whatever bits of autonomy we have to ply our customers with the illicit calories that signal our love. It is our job as servers to assemble the salads and desserts, pour the dressings, and squirt the whipped cream. We also control the number of butter pats our customers get and the amount of sour cream on their baked potatoes. So if you wonder why Americans are so obese, consider the fact that waitresses both express their humanity and earn their tips through the covert distribution of fats.

Ten days into it, this is beginning to look like a livable lifestyle. I like Gail, who says she is looking at 50, age-wise, but moves so fast she can alight in one place and then another without apparently being anywhere between. I clown around with Lionel, the teenage Haitian busboy, though we don’t have much vocabulary in common, and I loiter near the main sink to listen to the older Haitian dishwashers’ musical Creole, which sounds, in their rich bass voices, like French on testosterone. I bond with Timmy, the 14-year-old white kid who clears tables at night, by telling him I don’t like people putting their baby seats right on the tables; it makes the baby look too much like a side dish.

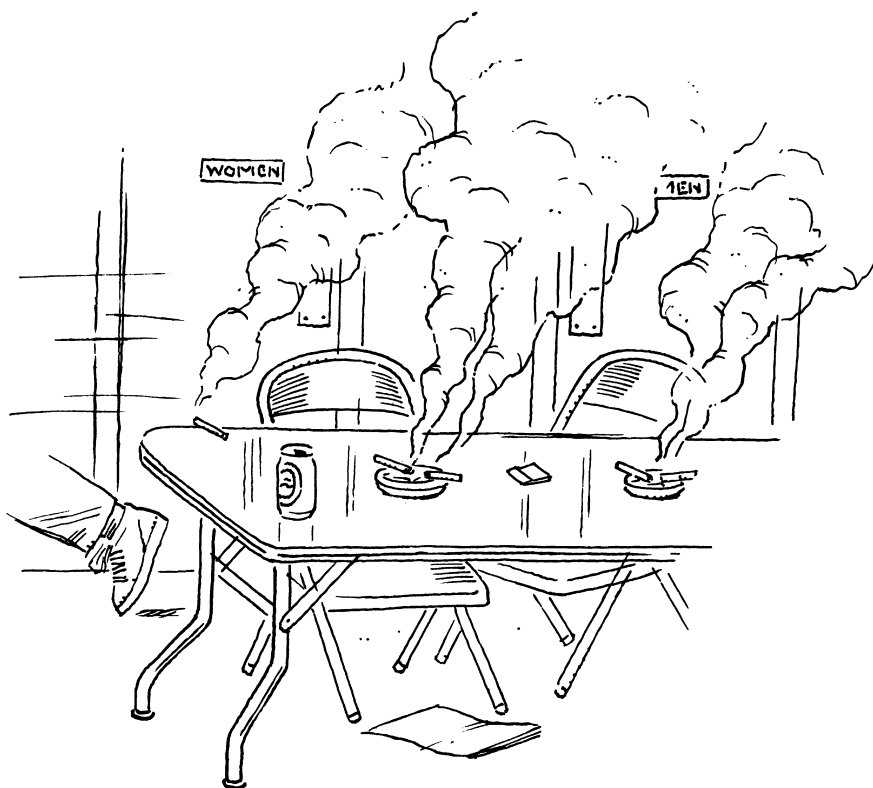


I especially like Joan, the svelte 40-ish hostess who turns out to be a militant feminist, pulling me aside one day to explain that “men run everything – we don’t have a chance unless we stick together.” Accordingly, she backs me up when I get overpowered on the floor, and in return I give her a chunk of my tips or stand guard while she sneaks off for an unauthorized cigarette break.

I finish up every night at 10 or 10:30, depending on how much of the side work I’ve been able to get done during the shift, and cruise home listening to the tapes I snatched at random when I left my real home. To bed by 1:30 or 2, up at 9 or 10, read for an hour while my uniform whirls around in the landlord’s washing machine, and then it’s another

eight hours spent following Mao’s central instruction as laid out in the Little Red Book, which was: serve the people. I could drift along like this, in some dreamy proletarian idyll, except for two things. One is management. If I have kept this subject to the margins so far it is because I still flinch to think that I spent all those weeks under the surveillance of men (and later women) whose job it was to monitor my behavior for signs of sloth, theft, drug abuse or worse.

Managers can sit – for hours at a time, if they want – but it’s their job to see that no one else ever does, even when there’s nothing to do, and this is why, for servers, slow times can be as exhausting as rushes. You start dragging out each little chore because if the manager



on duty catches you in an idle moment he will give you something far nastier to do. So I wipe, I clean, I consolidate ketchup bottles and recheck the cheesecake supply, even tour the tables to make sure the customer-evaluation forms are all standing perkily in their places.

On my first Friday at Hearthside there is a “mandatory meeting for all restaurant employees,” which I attend, eager for insight into our overall marketing strategy and the niche (your basic Ohio cuisine with a tropical twist?) we aim to inhabit. But there is no “we” at this meeting. Phillip, our top manager except for an occasional consultant sent out by corporate headquarters, opens it with a sneer: “The break room – it’s disgusting. Butts in the ashtrays, newspapers lying around, crumbs.” This windowless little room, which also houses the time clock for the entire hotel, is where we stash our bags and civilian clothes and take our half-hour meal breaks. But a

break room is not a right, he tells us. It can be taken away.

We should also know that the lockers in the break room and whatever is in them can be searched at any time. Then comes gossip: there has been gossip; gossip (which seems to mean employees talking among themselves) must stop. Off-duty employees are henceforth barred from eating at the restaurant, because “other servers gather around them and gossip.” When Phillip has exhausted his agenda of rebukes, Joan complains about the condition of the ladies’ room and I throw in my two bits about the vacuum cleaner. But I don’t see any backup coming from my fellow servers, each of whom has slipped into her own personal funk.

Just four days later we are suddenly summoned into the kitchen at 3:30 p.m., even though there are live tables on the floor. We all – about 10 of us – stand around Phillip, who announces grimly that there has been a

report of some “drug activity” on the night shift and that, as a result, we are now to be a drug-free workplace, meaning that all new hires will be tested and possibly also current employees on a random basis. I am glad that this part of the kitchen is so dark because I find myself blushing as hard as if I had been caught toking up in the ladies’ room myself. I haven’t been treated this way – lined up in the corridor, threatened with locker searches, peppered with carelessly aimed accusations – at least since junior high school. Back on the floor, Joan cracks, “Next they’ll be telling us we can’t have sex on the job.”

When I ask Stu, the assistant manager, what happened to inspire the crackdown, he just mutters about “management decisions” and takes the opportunity to upbraid Gail and me for being too generous with the rolls. From now on, there is to be only one per customer and it goes out with the dinner, not with the salad. He’s also been riding the cooks, prompting Andy to come out of the kitchen and observe – with the serenity of a man whose customary implement is a butcher knife – that “Stu has a death wish today.”

The other problem, in addition to the less-than-nurturing management style, is that this job shows no sign of being financially viable. You might imagine, from a comfortable distance, that people who live, year in and year out, on \$6 to \$10 an hour have discovered some survival stratagems unknown to the middle class. But no. It’s not hard to get my coworkers talking about their living situations, because housing, in almost every case, is the principal source of disruption in their lives, the first thing they fill you in on when they arrive for their shifts.

When Gail and I are wrapping silverware in napkins – the only task for which we are permitted to sit – she tells me she is thinking of escaping from her roommate by moving

into the Days Inn. I am astounded: how can she even think of paying \$40 to \$60 a day? But if I was afraid of sounding like a social worker, I have come out just sounding like a fool. She squints at me in disbelief: “And where am I supposed to get a month’s rent and a month’s deposit for an apartment?”



There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs. If you can’t put up the two months’ rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only a room, with a hotplate at best, you can’t save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for

the week ahead. You eat fast food or the hot dogs and plastic-foam cups of soup that can be microwaved in a convenience store. If you have no money for health insurance – and the Hearthside’s niggardly plan kicks in only after three months – you go without routine care or prescription drugs and end up paying the price. Gail, for example, was doing fine, health-wise anyway, until she ran out of money for estrogen pills. She is supposed to be on the company health plan by now, but they claim to have lost her application form and say they are beginning the paperwork all over again. So she spends \$9 a pop for pills to control the migraines she wouldn’t have, she insists, if her estrogen supplements were covered.

My own situation, when I sit down to assess it after two weeks of work, would not be much better if this were my actual life. The seductive thing about waitressing is that you don’t have to wait for payday to feel a few bills in your pocket, and my tips usually cover meals and gas, plus something left over to stuff into the kitchen drawer I use as a bank. But as the tourist business slows in the summer heat, I sometimes leave work with only \$20 in tips. (The gross is higher, but servers share about 15 percent of their tips with the busboys and bartenders.) With wages included, this amounts to about the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. The sum in the drawer is piling up, but at the present rate of accumulation will be more than \$100 short of my rent when the end of the month comes around. Nor can I see any expenses to cut. I do make my lunch almost every day – usually some slow-burning, high-protein combo like frozen chicken patties with melted cheese on top and canned pinto beans on the side. Dinner is at the Hearthside, which offers its employees a choice of a BLT or fish sandwich, or a hamburger, for only \$2. The burger lasts longest, especially if it’s heaped with gut-

puckering jalapeños, but by midnight my stomach is growling again.

So unless I want to start using my car as a residence, I have to find a second or an alternative job. I call all the hotels at which I’d filled out housekeeping applications weeks ago – the Hyatt, Holiday Inn, Econo Lodge, HoJo’s, Best Western, plus a half dozen locally run guest houses. When I finally get a positive response, I have been identified once again as server material. Jerry’s – again, not the real name – which is part of a well-known national chain and physically attached to another budget hotel, is ready to use me at once. The prospect is both exciting and terrifying, because, with about the same number of tables and counter seats, Jerry’s attracts three or four times the number of customers the gloomy old Hearthside does.

Picture a fat person’s hell, and I don’t mean a place with no food. Instead, there is everything you might eat if eating had no bodily consequences – the cheese fries, the chicken-fried steaks, the fudge-laden desserts – only here every bite must be paid for, one way or another, in human discomfort. The kitchen is a cavern, a stomach leading to the lower intestine that is the garbage and dishwashing area, from which issue bizarre smells combining the edible and the offal – creamy carrion, pizza barf, and that unique and enigmatic Jerry’s scent: citrus fart. The floor is slick with spills, forcing us to walk through the kitchen with tiny steps, like Susan McDougal in leg irons.

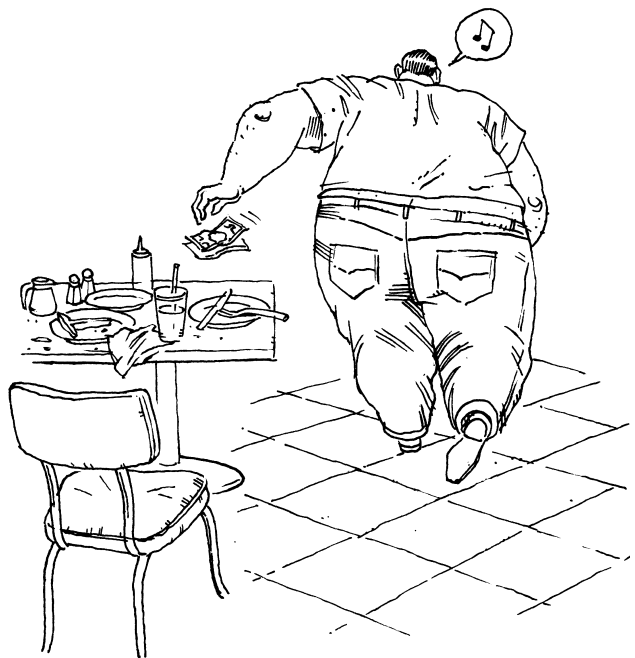
The break room summarizes the whole situation: there is none, because there are no breaks at Jerry’s. For six to eight hours in a row, you never sit except to pee. Actually, there are three folding chairs at a table immediately adjacent to the bathroom, but hardly anyone ever sits in this, the very rectum of the gastro-architectural system. Rather, the func-

tion of the pen-toilet area is to house the ash-trays in which servers and dishwashers leave their cigarettes burning at all times, like votive candles, so they don't have to waste time lighting up again when they dash back here for a puff. Almost everyone smokes as if their pulmonary well-being depended on it. I don't know why the antismoking crusaders have never grasped the element of defiant self-nurturance that makes the habit so endearing to its victims – as if, in the American workplace, the only thing people have to call their own is the tumors they are nourishing and the spare moments they devote to feeding them.

Now, the Industrial Revolution is not an easy transition, especially, in my experience, when you have to zip through it in just a couple of days. I have gone from craft work straight into the factory, from the air-conditioned morgue of the Hearthside directly into the flames. Customers arrive in human waves, sometimes disgorged 50 at a time from their tour buses, peckish and whiny. Instead of two “girls” on the floor at once, there can be as many as six of us running around in our brilliant pink-and-orange Hawaiian shirts.

I start out with the beautiful, heroic idea of handling the two jobs at once, and for two days I almost do it: working the breakfast/lunch shift at Jerry's from 8 till 2, arriving at the Hearthside a few minutes late, at 2:10, and attempting to hold out until 10. In the few minutes I have between jobs, I pick up a spicy chicken sandwich at the Wendy's drive-through window, gobble it down in the car, and change from khaki slacks to black, from Hawaiian to rust-colored polo. There is a problem, though. When, during the 3 to 4 p.m. dead time, I finally sit down to wrap silver, my flesh seems to bond to the seat. I try to

refuel with a purloined cup of clam chowder, as I've seen Gail and Joan do dozens of time, but Stu catches me and hisses, “No eating!” although there's not a customer around to be offended by the sight of food making contact with a server's lips. So I tell Gail I'm going to quit, and she hugs me and says she might just follow me to Jerry's herself.



Gail would have triumphed at Jerry's, I'm sure, but for me it's a crash course in exhaustion management. Years ago, the kindly fry cook who trained me to waitress at a Los Angeles truck stop used to say, “Never make an unnecessary trip; if you don't have to walk fast, walk slow; if you don't have to walk, stand.” But at Jerry's the effort of distinguishing necessary from unnecessary and urgent from whenever would itself be too much of an energy drain. Ideally, at some point you enter what servers call a “rhythm” and psychologists term a “flow state,” where signals pass from the sense organs directly to the

muscles, bypassing the cerebral cortex, and a Zen-like emptiness sets in.

But there's another capacity of the neuromuscular system, which is pain. I start tossing back drugstore-brand ibuprofens as if they were vitamin C, four before each shift, because an old computer-mouse related repeti-



tive-stress injury in my upper back has come back to full-spasm strength, thanks to the tray carrying. In my ordinary life, this level of disability might justify a day of ice packs and stretching.

Management at Jerry's is generally calmer and more professional than at the Hearthside, with two exceptions. One is Joy, a plump, blowsy woman in her early 30s who once kindly devoted several minutes of her time to instructing me in the correct one-handed method of tray carrying but whose moods change disconcertingly from shift to shift and even within one. The other is B.J., aka B.J. the

Bitch, whose contribution is to stand by the kitchen counter and yell, "Nita, your order's up, move it!" or, "Barbara, didn't you see you've got another table out there? Come on, girl!"

Among other things, she is hated for having replaced the whipped cream squirt cans with big plastic whipped-cream-filled baggies that have to be squeezed with both hands – reportedly because she saw or thought she saw employees trying to inhale the propellant gas from the squirt cans, in the hope that it might be nitrous oxide. On my third night, she pulls me aside abruptly and brings her face so close that it looks like she's planning to butt me with her forehead. But instead of saying, "You're fired," she says, "You're doing fine." The only trouble is I'm spending time chatting with customers, "That's how they're getting you."

Chatting with customers is for the good-looking young college-educated servers in the downtown carpaccio and ceviche joints, the kids who can make \$70 to \$100 a night. What had I been thinking? Customers are in fact

the major obstacle to the smooth transformation of information into food and food into money – they are, in short, the enemy. And the painful thing is that I'm beginning to see it that way myself. There are the traditional asshole types – frat boys who down multiple Buds and then make a fuss because the steaks are so emaciated and the fries so sparse, as well as the variously impaired – due to age, diabetes, or literacy issues – who require patient nutritional counseling.

The worst, for some reason, are the Visible Christians – like the 10-person table, all jolly and sanctified after Sunday night service, who

run me mercilessly and then leave me \$1 on a \$92 bill. Or the guy with the crucifixion T-shirt (“Someone To Look Up To”) who complains that his baked potato is too hard and his iced tea too icy (I cheerfully fix both) and leaves no tip at all. As a general rule, people wearing crosses or “WWJD?” (“What Would Jesus Do?”) buttons look at us disapprovingly no matter what we do, as if they were confusing waitressing with Mary Magdalene’s original profession.

I make friends, over time, with the other “girls” who work my shift. As at the Hearthside, the only recreation ever referred to is partying, which requires little more than some beer, a joint, and a few close friends. Still, no one is homeless, or cops to it, anyway, thanks usually to a working husband or boyfriend. All in all, we form a reliable mutual-support group; if one of us is feeling sick or overwhelmed, another one will “bev” a table or even carry trays for her. If one of us is off sneaking a cigarette or a pee, the others will do their best to conceal her absence from the enforcers of corporate rationality.

I make the decision to move closer to Key West. First, because of the drive. Second and third, also because of the drive: gas is eating up \$4 to \$5 a day, and although Jerry’s is as high-volume as you can get, the tips average only 10 percent, and not just for a newbie like me. Between the base pay of \$2.15 an hour and the obligation to share tips with the busboys and dishwashers, we’re averaging only about \$7.50 an hour. Then there is the \$30 I had to spend on the regulation tan slacks worn by Jerry’s servers – a setback it could take weeks to absorb. Of my fellow servers, everyone who lacks a working husband or boyfriend seems to have a second job: Nita does something at a computer eight hours a day; another welds. Without the 45-minute commute, I can picture myself working two

jobs and still having the time to shower between them.

So I take the \$500 deposit I have coming from my landlord, the \$400 I have earned toward the next month’s rent, plus the \$200 reserved for emergencies, and use the \$1,100 to pay the rent and deposit on trailer number 46 in the Overseas Trailer Park, a mile from the cluster of budget hotels that constitute Key West’s version of an industrial park. Number 46 is about eight feet in width and shaped like a barbell inside, with a narrow region – because of the sink and the stove – separating the bedroom from what might optimistically be called the living area, with its two-person table and half-sized couch. The bathroom is so small my knees rub against the shower stall when I sit on the toilet, and you can’t just leap out of the bed, you have to climb down to the foot of it in order to find a patch of floor space to stand on. Outside, I am within a few yards of a liquor store, a bar that advertises “free beer tomorrow,” a convenience store, and a Burger King – but no supermarket or, alas, laundromat.

When my month-long plunge into poverty was almost over, I finally landed my dream job – housekeeping. I did this by walking into the personnel office of the only place where I figured I might have some credibility, the hotel attached to Jerry’s, and confiding urgently that I had to have a second job if I was to pay my rent and, no, it couldn’t be front-desk clerk. “All *right*” the personnel lady fairly spits, “so it’s *housekeeping*,” and marches me back to meet Millie, the housekeeping manager, a tiny, frenetic Hispanic woman who greets me as “babe” and hands me a pamphlet emphasizing the need for a positive attitude. The pay is \$6.10 an hour and the hours are 9 in the morning till “whenever,” which I am hoping can be defined as a little before 2. I don’t have to ask about health insurance once

I meet Carlotta, the middle-aged African-American woman who will be training me. Carlie, as she tells me to call her, is missing all of her top front teeth.

On that first day of housekeeping – and the last day, although I don't yet know it – in my life as a low-wage worker in Key West, Carlie is in a foul mood. We have been given 19 rooms to clean, most of them checkouts, as opposed to stayovers, requiring the whole enchilada of bed stripping, vacuuming and bathroom scrubbing. When one of the rooms that had been listed as a stayover turns out to be a checkout, she calls Millie to complain, but of course to no avail.

I do the beds while she sloshes around the bathroom. For four hours without a break I strip and remake beds, taking about four and a half minutes per queen-sized bed, which I could get down to three if there were any reason to. We try to avoid vacuuming by picking up the larger specks by hand, but often there is nothing to do but drag the monstrous vacuum cleaner – it weighs about 30 pounds – off our cart and try to wrestle it around the floor. Sometimes Carlie lets me do the bathrooms. No service ethic challenges me here to new heights of performance. I just concentrate on removing the pubic hairs from the bathtubs, or at least the dark ones that I can see.

It is the TV that keeps us going, from Jerry to Sally to *Hawaii Five-O* and then on to the soaps. If there's something especially arresting, like "Won't Take No for an Answer" on Jerry, we sit down on the edge of a bed and giggle for a moment, as if this were a pajama party instead of a terminally dead-end job. The soaps are the best, and Carlie turns the volume up full blast so she won't miss anything from the bathroom or while the vacuum is on.

The tourists' rooms that we clean and,

beyond them, the far more expensively appointed interiors in the soaps, begin after a while to merge. We have entered a better world – a world of comfort where every day is a day off, waiting to be filled with sexual intrigue. We are only gate-crashers in this fantasy, however, forced to pay for our presence with backaches and perpetual thirst. The mirrors, and there are far too many of them in hotel rooms, contain the kind of person you would normally find pushing a shopping cart down a city street – bedraggled, dressed in a damp hotel polo shirt two sizes too large, and with sweat dribbling down her chin like drool.

I don't learn much about Carlie except that she hurts. She moves slowly about her work, muttering something about joint pain, and this is probably going to doom her, since the young immigrant housekeepers – Polish and Salvadoran – like to finish their rooms by 2 in the afternoon, while she drags the work out till 6. Already, management has brought in a woman to do what sounds like time-motion studies and there's talk about switching to paying by the room.

When I request permission to leave at about 3:30, another housekeeper warns me that no one has so far succeeded in combining housekeeping with serving at Jerry's: "Some kid did it once for five days, and you're no kid." With that helpful information in mind, I rush back to number 46, down four Advils (the name brand this time), shower, stooping to fit into the stall, and attempt to compose myself for the oncoming shift. So much for what Marx termed the "reproduction of labor power," meaning the things a worker has to do just so she'll be ready to labor again. I spend most of my hour-long break between jobs attempting to remove the edible portions of the slacks with a sponge and then drying them over the hood of my



car in the sun.

I can do this two-job thing, is my theory, if I can drink enough caffeine. I am not tired at all, I assure myself, though it may be that there is simply no more “I” left to do the tiredness monitoring.

Then it comes, the perfect storm. Four of my tables fill up at once. Four tables is nothing for me now, but only so long as they are obligingly staggered. As I bev table 27, tables 25, 28 and 24 are watching enviously. As I bev 25, 24 glowers because their bevs haven’t even been ordered. Twenty-eight is four yuppies, meaning everything on the side and agonizing instructions as to the chicken Caesars. Twenty-five is a middle-aged black couple who complain, with some justice, that the iced tea isn’t fresh and the tabletop is sticky. But table 24 is the meteorological event of the century: ten British tourists who seem to have made the decision to absorb the American experience entirely by mouth.

Here, everyone has at least two drinks – iced tea *and* a milkshake, Michelob *and* water (with a lemon slice in the water, please) – and

a huge, promiscuous orgy of breakfast specials, mozzarella sticks, chicken strips, quesadillas, burgers with cheese and without, sides of hash browns with cheddar, with onions, with gravy, seasoned fries, plain fries, banana splits. When I arrive with their first tray of food – after three prior trips just to refill bevs – Princess Di refuses to eat her chicken strips with her pancake-and-sausage special since, as she now reveals, the strips were meant to be an appetizer. Maybe the others would have accepted their meals, but Di, who is deep into her third Michelob, insists that everything else go back while they work on their starters. Meanwhile, the yuppies are waving me down for more decaf and the black couple looks ready to summon the NAACP.

Much of what happens next is lost in the fog of war. A menacing restlessness rises from the tables, all of which are full. Even the invincible Ellen is ashen from stress. I take table 24 their reheated main courses, which they immediately reject as either too cold or fossilized by the microwave. When I return to the kitchen with their trays (three trays in

three trips) Joy confronts me with arms akimbo, “What is this?” She means the food – the plates of rejected pancakes, hash browns in assorted flavors, toasts, burgers, sausages, eggs. “Uh, scrambled with cheddar,” I try, “and that’s...”

“No,” she screams in my face, “is it a Traditional, a Super-Scramble, an Eye-Opener?” I pretend to study my check for a clue, but entropy has been up to its tricks, not only on the plates but also in my head, and I have to admit that the original order is beyond reconstruction.

“You don’t know an Eye-Opener from a Traditional?” she demands in outrage. All I know, in fact, is that my legs have lost interest in the current venture and have announced their intention to fold. I am saved by a yuppie (mercifully not one of mine) who chooses this moment to charge into the kitchen to bel-
low that his food is 25 minutes late. Joy

screams at him to get the hell out of her kitchen, *please*, and then turns on Jesus in a fury, hurling an empty tray across the room for emphasis.

I leave. I don’t walk out, I just leave. I don’t finish my side work or pick up my credit card tips, if any, at the cash register or, of course, ask Joy’s permission to go. And the surprising thing is that you *can* walk out without permission, that the door opens, that the thick tropical night air parts to let me pass, that my car is still parked where I left it. There is no vindication in this exit, no surge of relief, just an overwhelming dank sense of failure pressing down on me and on the entire parking lot. I had gone into this venture in the spirit of science, to test a mathematical proposition, but somewhere along the line, in the tunnel vision imposed by long shifts and relentless concentration, it became a test of myself, and clearly I have failed. **M**

