

2007

Have a Wonderful Evening

Leandra Palermo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger>

Recommended Citation

Palermo, Leandra (2007) "Have a Wonderful Evening," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2007 : Iss. 1 , Article 35.
Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2007/iss1/35>

This Non-fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Messenger* by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

That low hum is the heat in my ears. It is almost too much to bear. The days in July are long and fearless, daring their tomorrows to burn hotter. At 5:00, things have not cooled still. The gravel is tired beneath my black shoes. The dull breeze swirls dust around me as my step quickens. Hurry, says the wind, hurry says my car keys clutched in my sweaty palm. The path is familiar and the sparkling Mill Pond greets my eyes. Beside it, the restaurant, named in the pond's honor, sits, proudly sporting its red and black awning. A banner proclaims "Live Jazz Wednesday Nights" and rows of BMWs, Mercedes Benzes and Jaguars line the front. I can hear the crowd on the patio laughing already, a lively mix. Old fishermen, who have known this area long before it was the Mill Pond House Raw Bar and Steakhouse. Slick yuppies, already drunk, red-faced and obnoxious. Families with spoiled children, who are unaware of the \$15.00 hamburger they took two bites of and left for the flies. I pass the valets, rich teenage boys lounging, showing off their cellphones with their jokes and stares. As if parking these fancy cars is only practice until they get their own. I smile to myself, remembering the panic last week when a valet had let a car roll backward down the hill, hitting a Saab with a sickening crunch. "Jesus Christ, George, Jesus Christ!" Jen had cried. Not so cool, I think, keeping my head trained forward. Swinging open the door, I exit the real world and enter my life behind the scenes of this place. I smile at the familiar faces. It isn't the bartender, the hostess, the busboy, the waitress. No, it is Steven, who got melted butter thrown on him by accident last week; Melissa, who loves to talk about herself and is far too pretty for her own good. It is Ricardo, who preaches to the dishwashers on his breaks and JJ who cooks and makes jewelry and is beautiful from the inside out. Taking my place, in my little area, I adjust my tie, caked with chocolate and heavy cream, pull back my hair and disappear into the realm of those who serve you.

That low hum is the freezer. The gelato is melting and I am getting angry. Once again reaching a tired arm among the sticky tubs, vanilla, chocolate, mint chip; the top of the raspberry is half broken and the Heath crunch is dangerously close to toppling them all. With a deft movement of my hand I flip the dial toward cooler. I control everything. I control the espresso machine, cringing when someone packs it too tightly or lets it overflow, tired of explaining that it goes plate, saucer, small spoon, lemon twist, sugar stick. Just let me do it, huh? You're a waiter, a busboy, a hostess, I am the dessert girl. This is my little corner of the restaurant, this nook across from the kitchen

door is my domain. It hides the iced teas in the morning, it hides Debbie's salad that table 72 sent back, it hides the Bailey's that the young businessman at the bar decided he didn't want. It hides Jimmy C's flask on a busy night, when Jen just yelled at him. It's where purses are shoved and tears are spilled. The wine the new girl put in the refrigerator wrong. New wine goes in the back to get cold. The trays of desserts sit there quietly, the lipstick on of the restaurant, whose job is to look pretty. You don't think you would miss it? You would. Here I am happy. This little universe is a safer place than my own mind.

That low hum is the restaurant revving up for a Saturday night. Jen's dress is white and form-fitting. Under the dimming lights she is stunning. She smells wonderful as she enters my station, never stopping, never faulting, never breathing. "All set for tonight, baby?" she asks, without waiting for an answer. My hands freeze, a strawberry top in one, a knife in the other. I hear her stilettos already miles away from me and I breathe easier. The blast of hot water on my rag cleanses the counters, settling my house. My little house. How familiar this place is. From my nook, I look out. The tables are set, the candles lit. The bar is wiped clean and the music is playing. Floors are vacuumed, light bulbs changed, carpet tears fixed and kitchen stocked. The orderly reservation book screams from behind neat handwriting that somebody took too many people and we are in trouble. Jen is smiling and playing with a baby, charming her parents, the mother dripping in diamonds, the father in large polo, sweating, money weighing on him. "We have a lovely table for you," she is saying. I have heard that a thousand times but they exchange glances of surprised pleasure, as if this beautiful creature actually cares about them. Blond hair blown to perfection like a halo around an angel, blue eyes that have seen the faces of too many lovers, tanned body, breast implants, too much makeup. Polished. Ready.

"Debbie, show them their table," she directs, honey-sweet voice dripping over her command. As she pauses in the kitchen, the fake smile disappears. The wrinkles under her eyes are highlighted in the fluorescent lights, tired. All that's waiting for her at home is a bottle of wine and empty rooms. Tanning oil, cigarettes, pretty clothes. White trash covered by polished general manager of a high-scale restaurant. She is the restaurant and the restaurant is her. Beautiful outside, groomed for what people want to see, covering messy loneliness, combed, primped, sewed, smoothed, seduced. The patrons fall in love with Jen, her warm smile and sweet smell, intoxicating as her voice, then revealed. A harsh curse at a busboy, a glimpse of her worn hands, the wrinkles under her eyes from no sleep and anger held within. Only I see the butter splatters on the backs of the red velvet curtains. I see the tomatoes on the floor in the prep kitchen later served with 75\$ steak. I see the dirty fingers of

the dishwasher grazing the inside of someone's white wine glass. All is a masquerade, covering the chaotic reality underneath.

I have a job to do. Staring at the fly circling around the lights is not getting the three cappuccinos, cheesecake and brownie a la mode done for table 64. Like clockwork I set down plates, wash and place and arrange and organize and primp my painstaking creations. The mint sprig must go just right. Perhaps a little more cinnamon on that second cappuccino. A new waiter enters, panicked. He had forgotten this order and now jams precariously teetering plates on a tray. Matt, I think his name is. Sweating, cursing. I stare at him in calm anger, wondering if he realizes he completely smeared my chocolate designs. Exiting with a flourish, he rejoins the flow of the restaurant. It moves like a living organism, everyone moving as if choreographed in a dance. I see a busboy run by and notice a happy birthday plate I had made earlier. The key lime pie had one bite out of it and the strawberry decorations were tossed carelessly on the side. Had this been my first night I might have been shaken, but not now. This is the restaurant's nature. The dance continues outside my station, as some older women almost collide with a waiter. The hostesses scramble to soothe arguments and everyone is watching out for Jen. This is her hour, striding through the restaurant clearing tables, setting down drinks and stroking egos all in one fell swoop. I cannot help but be impressed. Checking the mirror, Jen puts on lipstick.

—Leandra Palermo

Christin Fergus-Jean

