

Paula

With growing unease I prattled on, my eyes fixed on the beer tab that my fingers worked back and forth, deforming the soft aluminum with the nasty edge. At 1 am this lower room in my two level apartment was darkened, my roommates Mike and Joel upstairs asleep in our shared bedroom. Every few minutes I'd pause in my ramble and look up.

Across the small table her hazel eyes were fixed upon me, glowing with purpose, her mouth held in a small, knowing smile. I ripped my eyes back down to the fatiguing beer tab, working it more furiously as I recaptured my line of monologue and carried on.

Again I looked up. Still the unblinking gaze, boring into me, holding me longer with each visit, the smile broadening ever so slightly.

Once more I escaped and stammered on. But it was no good. I looked into her eyes and was lost. My words failed. My face went slack with the hypnosis complete. I was hers.

Of Hazleton

My sophomore year of college saw me transferring from a relatively lax state school in New Hampshire, cold crashing into Penn State's satellite campus system. Having several university branches around the state to choose from, I went with the Hazleton campus for its reasonable proximity to skiing in the Pocono mountains. On campus housing being very limited, I rented space in a one-bedroom apartment several miles off campus, to be shared with two other male students who would contract with the owner separately. We each would get a twin bed and a desk. Paradise!

Only then did I trouble myself to learn that Hazleton was a former coal town, had significant Italian, Polish and Irish enclaves, and most males over age 50 had black lung disease to some degree. Hazleton was struggling to remake itself, and the Penn State branch campus was helpful. Most of the students were natives, lived at home with parents, and rose from this ethnic melange of economic ruin.

Carol

In 1974 online course registration was not a thing, and so the incoming sophomores were required to line up to register for fall classes. There in line I immediately met and was smitten by Carol, who I would chase around for weeks before officially acquiescing to friend status.

From there on I would engage in the stealthy business of non-pursuit pursuit. Carol was waiting tables part time at Hazleton's swankiest steak house, Top Of The 80's, so named because it perched on a hill overlooking the intersection of interstates 80 and 81. Since I loved all things Carol, and I needed some work, I sought employment there also.

Galley Slave

I was promptly hired on as a dishwasher. Top Of The 80's had a big dining room, with as many as eight waitresses on a heavy shift. Here Hazleton's elite came for the most expensive dining in the area. The waitresses were costumed as Tyrolean peasants, complete with a red head scarf and dress with laced bodice, and gauzy white blouse. Carol looked really good in hers, not helpful to my feigned indifference.

In this Disney-fied steak house my duties as dishwasher included scraping plates, loading and unloading the high-speed dishwashing machine, properly storing the sanitized table service for immediate reuse, and at the end of each night, dipping out the dreaded grease trap. This foul task fell to me each shift at around midnight, plenty of time to get home and read for my 8 am class.

But it was not all grim. Out in the dining room on a Saturday evening, I could depend on some fair maiden on a first date ordering the pricey Surf n' Turf, barely touching it, then allowing it to be ferried back into my care. Being a starving college student I took a dim view of waste, and so in my haste to load the dishwasher I would seize a whole lobster tail or filet of beef tenderloin, stuff it into my mouth like a rabid dog, and chew mightily as I fought to keep an airway open. I did not lose weight during this period of scarce resources.

Sous Chef

My skill and diligence as a dishwasher were noted and I was trained in the arcane business of producing the restaurant's signature double-battered onion rings. Mastering this with the requisite reverence, I was elevated to sous chef. Here I was trained in arts like turning mushrooms in a pool of butter with a flick of the saute pan, making roux, the foundation of our basic sauces, and blocking and plating the ordered meal while the chef handled grilling of the well marbled cuts of beef. Anyone fool enough to order a lobster tail got it fresh from the freezer by way of my microwave oven, presented on a shell, not necessarily its original equipment. Similarly, the escargot were fished from a tin and packed into a snail shell with garlic butter for the broiler. Such was fine dining in Hazleton.

My rapid rise through the kitchen ranks, second only to the guys with cool hats and big knives, also changed my social station. Now I was allowed and encouraged to join in the laughter and teasing and occasional badgering of waitresses and busboys in our domain. It was a noisy, raucous, fast paced environment, a work-hard, play-hard sort of place, where a 1:00 am wrap up was occasion for a beer in the parking lot.

Established waitresses like Carol eyed us with a mixture of amusement and mild disapproval, not really threatened by our antics. Young new waitresses were terrified when sent on a false mission into the walk-in freezer only to be followed in by some evil prankster intent on a hug and a kiss. Today we would rightly call this a hostile work environment and sexual harassment. In 1974 we called it a few laughs in the kitchen.

While this behavior did not sit naturally with me, the young are malleable, and I went along eventually, even going so far as to follow some poor thing into the freezer myself on one occasion.

Revenge

In retrospect I am fairly certain that our fun was considerably less pleasant on the receiving end. Seasoned waitresses would seek to warn the new and vulnerable. Hurts would accumulate, jokes would wear out, and our smiling waitresses would band into a sisterhood intent on striking back in some fashion.

Paula was an imposing figure. Five foot ten and big boned, she was very shapely and her Tyrolean costume bodice was laced tight to present her white-bloused breasts impressively. With dark hair pulled back into a neat bun and a pretty face, this 23 year old did not need to take any rubbish from the post-adolescents running the kitchen. But she was quick and fun and gave as good as she got.

One day seemingly out of nowhere, Paula approached 19 year old me as a busy Saturday night shift was winding down.

What was I doing after work? Oh, nothing? Why not pick up some beers and we head over to your apartment to pound down a few? It was only midnight, after all. Throughout this proposal she eyed me with smoldering intent.

Viewed from my vantage point today, this was so clearly a trap of some sort. Artfully decline! Through my 19-year-old lens, this was a delightful manifestation of my rising status in the kitchen kingdom. A natural development, so fine a catch I had become. So some beers were bought and we converged upon my apartment across town.

Now Paula held me with her eyes, burning with intent. There was no time. There was no will. Only Paula.

Still holding my eyes she whispered, "Do you want to kiss me?"

I wordlessly nodded, still utterly in thrall. I may have whimpered a little, but I am hoping not.

Leaning in over the table we engaged in a kiss and held it as we slowly sank to the carpeted floor. The bedroom upstairs was well occupied by Mike and Joel, so the floor it was.

With the eye contact broken I regained some self-possession and set about the business of seeking to deftly work the fastenings of her Tyrolean costume. We must conclude that the Tyrol

is a place of virtue since these fastenings were formidable. Worse, Paula was in no way releasing control and was firmly in favor of keeping her clothing in place.

Thus began an extended and gentle wrestling match, with ground slowly won only to be firmly taken back. A series of hopeful developments followed by demoralizing retrenchments.

After suffering about an hour of my clumsy if gentle advances, I believe Paula concluded that my testicles had reached the targeted shade of deep blue, broke away, and stood.

She tidied herself, bid me a good night, and planted one last kiss on me just to ensure my total confusion. She let herself out.

Her telling of the tale to her sister waitresses must have been the event of the season, joyfully received by any and all I may have wronged.

How I'd love to hear that telling now.

Coal country justice served.