

Onshore Hospitality

~~My sister Sarah called me~~ one day and asked ~~me~~ if I wanted a part-time job with a local cruise company, ~~one very~~ similar to her former employer. The position would require sitting in a hospitality suite at a waterfront hotel on the Willamette River from eight am to five pm, tagging bags and ensuring ~~that~~ guests got their proper transports to either the airport or the cruise ship. Basically, I was to sit in a room with old, white, wealthy people for nine hours each weekend and talk to them while they waited to go somewhere else. It paid well. I said yes.

I had notions of what the passengers would be like ^{given} from my experience ~~ten years~~ ^{ten years earlier} ~~earlier~~ on the cruise to Canada with my father; I expected them to be unbearable ^M ⁺ unbearable that is, without the twenty dollars an hour I was being paid to bear them.

It would also be the first time I'd work a full eight-hour shift since my stint ~~back~~ behind the cheese counter, so I was ~~a little~~ nervous; I decided to take extra steroids just to be sure I could make it through the day without any pain. Something I discovered though, is ~~that~~ when not being used to fight illness or tigers, ~~a little extra cortisol~~ often makes me sweaty and overly chatty. As it turned out, this was a good thing in the context of the cruise job; my mission was to be friendly, act like I cared, and answer questions.

That first day on the job, with a good breakfast and a few extra steroid pills under my belt, I put on my blue button ^{up} shirt and nametag, and headed down to the hotel. I set

up a poster^g board with the company's name and logo on it outside the door to our conference room and sat down at a little table inside the door with pens, the guest itinerary, and my purse. I poured myself a cup of coffee.

The guests arrived in small groups with their luggage in tow and I checked them off the itinerary and tagged their bags with their cabin numbers. Soon I made friends with my first guest ^M a retired cop and weapons consultant to Hollywood (*Miami Vice* included). He'd worked in Miami for his entire career and we talked for nearly two hours about the drug wars of the ^{80's} 80's. He told me stories of high-speed chases in powerboats, drug^g heists and corrupt cops.

The other guests were surprisingly jovial and friendly. The older, single ladies were sweet and the older men enjoyed telling me about their careers. Driving home that day, I thought about my initial apprehension that the guests would make me feel uncomfortable. ~~I was surprised by how interesting and pleasant the guests had been;~~ ^{They were interesting and pleasant} I hadn't been uncomfortable at all. Their wealth didn't intimidate or shock me ~~in the least.~~ Perhaps the passengers had fundamentally changed in the last ten years. Or perhaps it was me.

Of course, many of them treated me ~~in that way that people used to being served~~ ~~treat service workers.~~ ^g with meticulous politeness, disinterest, and a kind of tired resignation to the roles that society has thrust upon all of us. It was mostly the men who treated me this way ^M + older men on the cruise with their wives who really didn't want to go in the first place. ^{I had} ~~It had~~ been their wife's idea. They'd much rather be home spending their well-earned retirement doing what they'd waited for their whole working lives to

do: write their epic science fiction novel. (I met at least three male passengers ~~over the~~
~~course of my employment~~ who were using their retirement to write genre fiction.) These
men, and sometimes women, didn't smile at me very much; they didn't pretend to be my
friend. *I'm doing my job by taking my wife on this cruise*, they seemed to suggest, *so*
please do yours. They weren't interested in me as a person in the slightest. They just
wanted to treat me as another private in their vacation army, both of us stoic and
uncomplaining.

But some passengers were ¹ in fact, horrible. One woman talked about the bacterial
infection she believed she'd caught from all the dirty Mexicans at her neighborhood
Walmart. She was very angry; she'd almost died. Another man, when the subject of
family holidays came up, told me with glee, "My daughter is a liberal. I love making her
cry!" ² Another angrily refused to leave the hotel in order to arrive at the airport early.
Then, as if on cue, his elderly parents and sister surrounded me in a full circle and began
yelling ³ to also yell at me from each of the cardinal directions about the various slights and bad
service they'd received during the cruise, all the while interrupting one another and me.
Luckily ¹ the family had made enemies with the other passengers during their week on the
boat, ^{as is} and a kindly passenger came to my defense and broke up the circle of yelling adults.
Eventually ¹ the family calmed down and ^{wilted} ~~seemed to wilt~~ into the hotel chairs like lumpy
flowers, sodden and dazed from a week of cruise ship food and booze.

~~Then~~ ¹ that afternoon, two sweet old lady passengers ushered me into the hallway
and told me in hushed tones how awful the family had been, how they'd been "hard-core
alcoholics" ¹ and how I shouldn't worry about them and all those awful things they said,

1. Is any of this quotable material? Be careful using this kind of language without quotation, as it could come off as coming from the narrator, rather than the woman.

2. Instead of using "another man" and/or "another," describe these people to give them that quirk of differentiation.

3. This is a long and confusing sentence to read in one go. Either integrate the last clause into the second or separate them.

and that the cruise company and myself had done a fabulous job and ~~had~~ provided fabulous customer service.

While ~~the~~ ^{these} hallway encouragements warmed my heart, I chuckled to myself later that they were concerned ~~that I not take~~ ^{I'd taken} the family's criticisms of the service they'd ^{at the thought} ~~received~~ ^{personally}. They didn't seem to realize that, while the incident had briefly violated my sense of self and general human politeness, any ownership I took over the company, the service, etc., was beyond the scope of my pay scale to embrace ~~in any meaningful way~~. Even though I ~~had~~ apologized and acted concerned, I did not and would not ^{actually} take responsibility for their experience while on the boat. I've worked in service my entire life and ~~have~~ never been the type to take responsibility for anything beyond my own actions. I know that taking personal responsibility for a company as a whole, as a lowly hourly worker, is a recipe for burnout, ^{and} ~~this is also~~ probably why ^{I've} ~~I have~~ never advanced into management. Also, it's a dirty capitalist trick.

I was reminded of the time I worked for The Gap briefly when I was twenty years ~~old~~ and desperate for a job. During the training session the manager said to the group of young recruits, "Now remember ^M ~~+~~ when you're wearing this Gap nametag, your actions represent The Gap, so don't forget to take off your nametag before you leave work!" She demonstrated the action, holding up a nametag and a blue polo shirt she ^{used} ~~had been using~~ earlier as an example of appropriate work garb.

She smiled and continued, "In fact, one of our employees from last year forgot to take his nametag off and then got into a fight in the Safeway parking lot and was arrested by the police. It made the news and he was described as a 'local Gap employee'." She looked at the other manager and they both smirked.

I spent my first and only day at the Gap working the dressing rooms. Customers kept asking me how the khakis looked on them, ^{and} ~~At twenty years old,~~ I found it incredibly awkward to answer them, [↑] as it seemed to require commenting honestly on their body parts. Also, business was picking up at the restaurant where I'd worked before and I wanted to get a job there instead.

1. This is a little long, simplify for clarity.

~~But~~ [↑] when I quit over the phone, newly educated in the evils of capitalism from my brief stint at The Evergreen State College, I felt I had a chance to condemn what I saw as over-the-top consumerism. I told the manager I didn't want to encourage people to buy clothes made in the third world under probably sweatshop conditions. "And," I mumbled, summoning the courage to condemn the entire industry, "people don't really need to buy that many clothes. I feel like I am encouraging consumerism."

She calmly replied that I wasn't forcing anyone to buy the clothes. "It's their choice if they want to buy the clothes or not," she said. She sounded as if she'd heard it all before, ^{and} ~~as if she'd~~ used this line on reluctant employees in the past. She did not, [↑] however, argue with my assertion that Gap clothing had been made in a sweatshop.

"Well, I can't come in again," I said.

"Thanks for letting me know," she said.

My father, a proud union member, ^{gave} ~~has given~~ me one piece of advice in regards to jobs: "Fuck them before they fuck you." ^{A sentiment} ~~And~~ I suppose [↑] on a certain level I've taken it to heart. ^{I've} ~~This sentiment~~ is not to say that I have hated all the bosses and jobs I've ever had. ~~Instead~~ [↑] it's a warning: the company will always care more about a nametag than they

care about you. It's not personal. Basically, the manager at the Gap was telling me: *It doesn't matter what you do. You could be anyone.*

And so it went with onshore hospitality. The guests pretended to be nice to me, and I pretended to care about the water pressure in their cabin. It's amazing any kind of genuine human interaction happened at all. And yet it did.

1. Is this, by chance, the name of a company? I just want to be sure in case it needs to be capitalized.

The most honest conversation I had with cruise ship guests happened on the last day of the fall tour season. One couple from Singapore, by way of India and Hong Kong, sat and talked with me for nearly an hour. They were fascinating and seemed very intelligent. Their children lived in the United States and in India. He'd owned his own shipping company and had done very well for himself. ~~Theirs was the last flight~~ of the night and they waited with me until nearly six.

2. This seems unnecessary in their description, a given. I recommend cutting it.

3. Who? please clarify if you mean the husband, or a son

As we talked, the man pulled out a shopping bag from Walgreens and emptied it onto the round conference table. It was all chewing gum, several different brands and flavors. I thought this was odd, but didn't say anything. He opened up a pack ~~and~~ put two pieces of Juicy Fruit into his mouth and began furiously chewing.

"I've never been to India, but I would like to go," I said, "My friend ~~who~~ lives there ^{and} told me to prepare myself for poverty unlike anything I've seen here." I told them I'd seen a documentary about the slums of Mumbai. "I couldn't believe the living conditions," I confessed. "I mean ^{I'd} they were ~~even~~ worse than what, I guess, I had imagined ~~them to be~~." I described the children sleeping on the floor underneath welding tables and the lack of clean water.