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Quitting Your Job in Hyperbole, 
Or, a Long Way to Walk

I have not eaten in nine hours, I have not smoked in thirty-six days, I have not touched my absentee finance in two months, and I have not successfully masturbated in longer. I am tired, I am irritated, I am hungry.

In the kitchen of the Iron Gate Pub and Grill, 34-year-old kitchen manager Clyde Frockheimer is pissed off.

"Look, Fryer Bitches," Clyde says. "It's absolutely imperative that you put the fries in the fryer for the exact amount listed on the instructions. They are supposed to be crisp, yet malleable. These…"

—and here he throws the saucer to the floor, spilling potato casualties from here to the dish room.

"These are shit!"

Clyde grabs a nearby, cinematically-placed broom and thrusts it upon Jake, aka Dishwasher Bitch.

"You clean this up, Dishwasher Bitch. Then shine me up some ramekins."

Jake is stuck. His ankle bracelet only allows him to be in his home or in this bar. He has to take his smoke breaks in the basement or the cops show up, making the customers nervous (especially the ones with fake IDs).

Clyde returns to his lair in the walk-in cooler to do some more whip-its with the expired whipped cream canisters.

I return to the floor to bring table forty-nine their meal.

Outside the kitchen, an American band is pretending to be an English band, intermittently doing The Who and Radiohead covers. The crowd is less than engaged and table forty-nine is expectantly staring at me, watching my arrival like a slow-moving train, as I am balancing fifteen pounds of food and ceramic on my tiny left hand.

"All right, ladies and gentleman," I announce. "Dinner's ready."

Table forty-nine consists of four classic restaurant characters. Fat Man Who Thinks He's Funny, Bitchy Wife Who Thinks All Women Want Her Husband, Teenaged Daughter (Embarrassed), Her Boyfriend (Shy).

"Well, it's about time," Fat Man says, with something I think is called a chortle. "What'd ya do, kill the cow yourself?"

I begin setting down their plates. Stuffed Chicken. Pork Tenderloin. 8 oz. Strip Sizzler with Haystack Onions. Double-burger with Chips.
I wanted mayonnaise on this," Wife says, pointing to burger.
"The mayonnaise is on the bottom of the bun."
She scoffs. "How am I supposed to know that?"
"Faith."
They begin to eat before I've left. Juice runs over their fat lips, their chins, their fingers. They sweep up sauces onto meat, onto bread. Forks slicing open tender meat. I ache with jealousy.

"Anything else I can do for you?"
Their mouths are too lush and full. The girl looks at me with big eyes and shakes her head.

The thing about restaurants is that there are two kinds of assholes. There are the assholes you work with and the assholes you wait on. There are several varieties of each, and exceptions, but both are inconsequential.

The people you work with are intensely dissatisfied with their jobs and therefore their lives. It is important to share your cigarettes and pick up shifts for them at first. They are territorial, inclined to tell everyone else at work that you are addicted to methamphetamines and have sex with strangers, more likely to try to steal your tips, and until you have proven yourself via gang initiation, you are scum. With the other female staff, it is important not to be prettier than they are and if you are, you should have smaller breasts or be engaged. With the male staff, it's best if they think they can one day sleep with you, but that that day be far away and contingent on their unerring loyalty. Managers are usually twice your age and mad at you for having your youth. They will try to suck it out of you by insinuating you are stupid. Always remind yourself, 'Who's forty with a job that consists of making sure the onion rings are crisp and the rugs are smooth? Who's still got two decades to slit their wrists before that happens?'

You should immediately find out which staff member everyone else hates, and start hating them too. They are already the bottom rung, and it is important for your transient career that they stay there. Become interested in their boring lives. Agree with them that if times were different, they would have finished college. Tell them there is still hope that they'll be famous one day. Concur that table sixteen's tits are fake. Make up a story about this one time you were so high, you thought you were in Eastern Europe, but you were really just in an underpass with the French flag spray-painted on the sidewalks. Denounce all advances from the opposite sex by laughing and walking away. Never punch anyone in the kidney. Do not deny the option that the dishwasher might be gay, or that the bartender might be a slut, but do not make any judgments yourself. Not yet. One day, someone will ask you into the break room with them and pass you a roach. Then you will know that you are one of them. If this never happens, fear not. Turn over in restaurants is so fast, you'll be a senior member of the crew in six months. Tops.

You will not fit in with most of the people who made out with who on the deck; you need your after-shift drinks. You will want to make out with the next boy without the boyfriend didn't live in New York. You think about calling the cook, who you off the dashboard, but you will tell your four dollars is for a train ticket. Some.

You'll fall asleep with your hand down.

I have been cocktailing for three years. The Iron Gate. The Iron Gate used to be for the vaulted doors through which families used to sit and collect the scar is the martini bar. There is a patio that Church. There are olives and lime juice, be, tax forms and spare aprons where liquor cage where hearse used to park used to be.

We are suited in black, with clip-on Halloween weekend. We embrace our quirky place to take your client, your birthday. The skeletons hanging from plastic-bat faces have been rubbed with heat warp now instead of black hands and under our fingernails is a Life with the Thrill Kill Cult after 9 the Monster Mash... over and over a.

My name is Eliza. I attend school here. I have a fiancee who lives in New York. I have a cat, who is too skinny—like my friend Nancy, who loves rabbits and every night, providing the soundscape for a decent meal. Fuck, I'd eat my sp

Kitty is a waitress and a pharmacist.

"I took a Xanax after the first din with this Redbull and this shot of vo then I can go home and snort the other noon."

But Halstead is a bitch.

"Kitty, please," she contests. "My told you that if you roll my silverwa
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of the crew in six months. Tops.

You will not fit in with most of them. You will not be interested in who

made out with who on the deck; you will not stay there until 4am, sipping

your after-shift drinks. You will want to go home, curl in a ball, count your

tip money, cry and wake up the next morning for school. You will wish your

boyfriend didn't live in New York. You will wish you weren't so tired. You will

think about calling the cook, who you know is sitting in his van, snorting coke

off the dashboard, but you will tell yourself that you're on a budget and that

fifty dollars is for a train ticket. Somewhere. Someday.

You'll fall asleep with your hand down your pants. Again.

I have been cocktailing for three years, but I have spent nine months at the

Iron Gate. The Iron Gate used to be a funeral parlor, and has been named

for the vaulted doors through which patrons must enter. Up top, where the

families used to sit and collect the scattered memories of someone else's past,

is the martini bar. There is a patio that overlooks the courtyard of St. Ignacie's

Church. There are olives and lime juice where the casket showroom used to

be, tax forms and spare aprons where the mortician used to keep office, the

liquor cage where hearse used to park and freezers where... where the freezers

used to be.

We are suited in black, with clip-on bowties. We are the most popular bar on

Halloween weekend. We embrace our past. We're a full-kitchen goth bar—the

quirky place to take your client, your girlfriend, your son on his eighteenth

birthday. The skeletons hanging from the ceiling are fake and unrealistic. The

plastic-bat faces have been rubbed away. The candles on the tables are purple

with heat warp now instead of black. The fake blood we used to rub on our

hands and under our fingernails is a health code violation. We only play My

Life with the Thrill Kill Cult after 9 pm. Before that, it's Depeche Mode vs.

the Monster Mash... over and over again.

My name is Eliza. I attend school full-time, and I work almost every night

here. I have a fiancee who lives in New York City, working on fame and fortune.

I have a cat, who is too skinny—like me. I live in an antique apartment with

my friend Nancy, who loves rabbits and the internet, whose boyfriend spends

every night, providing the soundscape of what I'm missing. I'd give my spleen

for a decent meal. Fuck, I'd eat my spleen

if I knew how to cook it.

Kitty is a waitress and a pharmacist.

"I took a Xanax after the first dinner rush, so I figure if I take this Aderol

with this Redbull and this shot of vodka, I should make it until last call, and

then I can go home and snort the other half of that Vicodin and sleep until

noon."

But Halstead is a bitch.

"Kitty, please," she contests. "My boyfriend has some chronic pot and I
told you that if you roll my silverware tonight, you can have some with us in
our new van." "You got a new van?" "Yeah, we got it from the police auction." Halstead is named after the street her mother's water broke on in what she refers to as Chi-town, but which most people call Chicago. Halstead is always telling us what it's like in a real city, like, 'here there are only twelve internet cafes, but in Chi-town, there are eighty-six.' "Do you want some pot, Eliza?" Halstead says.

So accusatory. I used to work at a bar where fitting in involved knowing all of the words and appropriate fist-pumping-actions involved in Journey's 'Don't Stop Believing.' Six months ago, Halstead told me no one would trust me if I didn't smoke out with them at least once. I told her that's because the marijuana was making her paranoid. That night, we all sat in a séance circle jerk, passing around a roach and all I could think about was all the boys Kitty had gone down on and hope that the sear of the burning leaves was killing all the diseases she probably had. Halstead was proud of herself for making me a bad girl, kept rubbing my shoulder and asking me how it felt to be a big girl. I rode my bike home in the rain, full of fantasies about how my landlord would show up tomorrow with a cup, informing me of new state legislation allowing tenants to be drop-tested without warning. I thought about poppy seed muffins and Judy Garland. I thought about how hungry I was. I thought about how Taco Bell is always open, but I was too embarrassed to go there, red-eyed and obvious. I fell asleep in my closet and got scratches on my face from the tulle of the prom dresses I'd never thrown away.

"No," I say. "I'm just really hungry." "Go eat some croutons," she suggests. "Dip them in red-pepper herb aioli. They're so good." "We're not allowed to eat croutons because of inventory," Kitty says.

I got fired from the Journey bar for serving wet cat food with real salmon additives on crackers to the manager of a strip club. I told him it was a happy hour special appetizer. He came in every Thursday, and told me about financing options on implants. 'You'd be prettier with something to hold on to.' Every shitty two-dollar tip was accompanied with a wink and a 'here's for the next cup.' I didn't see what the big deal was. He loved the salmon paste, and if I didn't toss the empty can on top of his guest check at the end, he'd have never known.

Clyde is eating romaine lettuce and explaining to Jake that he is a 'fag' because he likes it 'in the butt.' Clyde's therapist told him this is necessary, because Clyde has problems feeling secure in his masculinity. Clyde has no evidence that Jake is a homosexual, but when asked why Clyde thinks so, he responds with, 'Because I am the boss.' "Eliza," Clyde says, "run Kitty's food."

Another platter of delicious food, into the dining room. "You're not our waitress," Business says. "But I have your food." I set the tray down on a nearby table. "Now who had the corned beef?" "Our waitress would know who has been taking a piss, so if you want to eat your corned beef, one of you motherfuckers place an order." I glare at the Whiskey Corned-Beef on Thick-Cut Mashed Potatoes and who had the Thai Basil Ravioli with Garlic Sauce right in front of me. A pause. "I had the ravioli," his friend says. I slam the plates down and set them next to the table. "By process of the elimination," I say. Neither says a word, so I leave. It was an extra challenge trying to hang down our tuxedo-suited manager. I don't know if it specifically says in the handbook, but I'm not going to get fired tonight.

Once, we had a photo shoot in the Iron Gate. We were perched sexily on kegs of beer, or pretending to be yanking on the cold red lipstick and lots of eyeliner. They were Brannigan. They were the hottest zoners over the summer and twenty bucks. As a result, Halstead and I got up lip-stick stained cigarette butts all over our white gloves. Halstead threw up twice when I lit a cigarette hanging from my lips. I thought I was going to get fired, but instead I started quitting smoking.

Now, I'm hiding in the liquor cage,
JULIET BENNETT-RYLAH

with, 'Because I am the boss.'

"Eliza," Clyde says, "run Kitty's food for her."

Another platter of delicious food, hefted onto my shoulder and carried out into the dining room.

"You're not our waitress," Business Man No. 1 points out.

"But I have your food."

I set the tray down on a nearby table.

"Now who had the corned beef?"

"Our waitress would know who had the corned beef," No. 1 asserts.

"Listen, dickhole," I say, "Your waitress is either smoking a cigarette or taking a piss, so if you want to eat your fucking dinner, you'll tell me which one of you motherfuckers placed an order for the Slow-Roasted in Irish Whiskey Corned-Beef on Thick-Cut Imported Rye with a side of Redskin Mashed Potatoes and who had the Three-Cheese Blend Stuffed Spinach and Basil Ravioli with Garlic Sauce right now."

A pause.

"I had the ravioli," his friend says.

I slam the plates down and set the sandwich in front of the first man.

"By process of elimination," I say. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

Neither says a word, so I leave. It is over my shoulder that I see him flagging down our tuxedo-suited manager.

I don't know if it specifically says you can't call a customer a 'motherfucker' in the handbook, but I'm not going to count on that loophole. I am going to get fired tonight.

Once, we had a photo shoot in the liquor cage where girls in spray-on latex perched sexily on kegs of beer, or held bottles of wine between their thighs, pretending to be yanking on the cork with orgasmic delight. The girls wore red lipstick and lots of eyeliner. They had big hair like Terri Nunn and Laura Brannigan. They were the hottest zombies I'd ever seen. The tagline said, 'Drink to Wake the Dead at The Iron Gate Funeral Bar.' For weeks, they'd tried to get Kitty and I to be the models for free. Halstead was pissed that no one asked her, but it was because Halstead would never make a convincing zombie. Zombies aren't pudgy. The girls they got were named Mercedes and Barley (in theory) and were strippers. As payment, they gave both girls an open tab and twenty bucks. As a result, Halstead threw up twice herself while I politely looked the other way, cigarette hanging from my lips. I thought I'd quit the Iron Gate that night, but instead I started quitting smoking.

Now, I'm hiding in the liquor cage, crouched behind a pile of boxes marked
with some vineyard's name, I'm nervous.
"Baby, I'm going to get fired."
"Liza, did you do that dog food thing again?"
"It was cat food, Thom, and no, I called someone a motherfucker."
"So?"
"So, he's, like, mad about it."
"Did he deserve it?"
"Maybe."
"Well, maybe they won't fire you," Thom says. "You're a good employee, aren't you?"
Sure. Except that I hate my job, show up ten minutes late, and have been 'smoking' the same half-finished cigarette butt that I found in the community ash tray a week ago as an excuse to take breaks.
"No," I say.
And I think that maybe I am going to... cry? I am clutching, with one hand, the phone. I am clutching, with the other, my stomach, which has been eating itself for four hours. I understand the concept of starving from a medical perspective, but not emotionally, and therefore, I am certain that's what is happening to me.

Bring on the flies. The vulture. The plastic bats hanging from the ceilings. The Halloween decorations all year long.
"Why can't... you just move home?" I ask him.
"Because I'm getting a masters' degree," he says. "Because I have to progress with my life. Because two people, even if they love each other, cannot live or plan their lives around each other."
"I just want you to have sex with me, maybe more than once a month," I whine.
"Is that really all you want?"
"No! I want to live with you. Why can't we live in sin together like every other couple? Why do we have to live in different states?"
"You only live in Pennsylvania."
"No, I live in Transylvania, all the time!"
And then the door opens. The basement to the basement.
And it comes, the voice of an angry god: "Eliza."
The big boss. The monster at the end of level eight.
"I have to go," I whisper.

The boss is coming down the stairs. He is going to tell me I'm stupid, and incompetent, and unworthy of employment at this prestigious and kitschy bar, this staple of city nightlife. He is going to tell me I'll never graduate college, and maybe it's true, because all I want to do right now is drop out of life and move to New York. I hear strippers don't need big tits there. What an oasis!

I slip around the back of the liquor cage, and it isn't until he's walked into one of the offices that I escape up the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Eliza, your table fifty-six is mole so long!" Clyde screams.
"That, you douche bag, is an inter scream back.

I heft this plate, without paying any attention to it, and am on the floor again. It's cold.

Table fifty-nine is a two-top bench. The boss pours Jagermeister in his coffee when he interpret the cringe on his face when he

A couple, huddled together on one side, smoking a cigar and trying to look rested.

"Your meal is ready, folks," I say, trying to ignore that my eye hollows are becoming a new fashion look.

The bar is playing an instrument that makes me just want to sob.

I set the tray down on the casing. I knock an empty ash tray to the floor.

"Your Herb and Spice Stuffed Mushroom Check."

And now the Potato and Rosemary Check.

The boss is waiting, fingers Venom: pick up the last plate.

"And your Portobello and Boursin Check."

I set the last plate down.

"Is there anything else I can get a..."

"You didn't tell me there were onions!"

"It's... it's in the menu," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Well, I don't like onions."

She keeps looking at me, I keep looking at her, flinching, like perhaps I will spit it at her.

"Eliza, you're fired."

"And you're fat," I snap. "You can't fire me, and that is the only place, according to the law, you can be fired."
“Eliza, your table fifty-six is molding under the heat lamp it’s been there so long!” Clyde screams.

“That, you douche bag, is an intense hyperbole and we both know it!” I scream back.

I heft this plate, without paying attention to what may or may not be on it, and am on the floor again. It’s colder. I’m sweating.

Table fifty-nine is a two-top bench near the back bar, where the tender pours Jagermeister in his coffee when no one’s looking and thinks no one can interpret the cringe on his face when he sips it.

A couple, huddled together on one side, and their third wheel friend, smoking a cigar and trying to look really swank, in spite his obvious state of ‘alone.’

“Your meal is ready, folks,” I say, trying to be cheerful, but I know full well that my eye hollows are becoming a mascara massacre.

The bar is playing an instrumental version of a Ministry song and even that makes me just want to sob.

I set the tray down on the casing for one of our floor-to-ceiling pillars, knocking an empty ash tray to the floor.

“Your Herb and Spice Stuffed Meatloaf, sir.” Check.

“And now the Potato and Rosemary Soup in an Asiago Bread Bowl.”

The boss is waiting, fingers Venus-fly-trapped in each other. It’s over. I pick up the last plate.

“And your Portobello and Boursin Croissant?”

I set the last plate down.

“Is there anything else I can get anyone here?”

“You didn’t tell me there were onions on this sandwich,” the woman says.

“It’s... it’s in the menu,” I say, though it’s more of a whimper.

“Well, I don’t like onions.”

She keeps looking at me, I keep looking at her. And then?

And then something happens. You enter a tunnel and your call drops unexpectedly. You strike the last chord in your overture and all the wires snap at once, leaving you soundless. You light a cigarette and your lungs explode.

“Bitch, please.”

My manager is on his way now. I hear his wingtips tip-toe. I can hear the apologies bubbling in his larynx.

“You’re an idiot, and you don’t deserve that sandwich.”

And I take it. And I turn to my manager, and I take a big bite out of it. He flinches, like perhaps I will spit it at him, but I swallow.

“Eliza, you’re fired.”

“And you’re fat,” I snap. “You can’t fire me, because we are not in the office, and that is the only place, according to my employee handbook, in which I can be fired.”
Buttery flaky bread crumbs line my throat, floating on the mucus that accompanies being on the verge of one hell of a crying jag. The mushroom and fancy cheese sits in the hollow of my stomach, and I imagine a thousand rats inside me leaping on it.

"Therefore," I hiss, "I am quitting. There are no specifics as to where I am allowed to quit, so I'm quitting right here, in front of these assholes. And you know what else?"

No one prompts me.

"I am keeping this."

I hold up the sandwich. Portobello, garlic-roasted juices drip down my skinny wrists.

"And there's nothing you can do about it unless you want to tear it from my hand, fucker."

Walking. A simple activity, complicated by rage and release. The other hand to my throat, tearing away the bowtie. I will not be buried in a bowtie. I will not wait tables for the rest of my life. I will not spend every sunrise clambaked and curious. I am not cut out for this business. I've never even been arrested.

Kitty tries to stop me.

"What are you doing, Eliza? If you quit, then I have to be last out."

"I'm going to New York!"

"What?"

"You heard me, Kitty. I am getting laid tonight, and I don't have to wait until last call to find out by who."

I think she's insulted and that's why she slaps me, but whatever. I kick a chair at her, and it hits her in her fellating knee.

In the streets outside, it rains quietly, consolingly. Halstead is there, smoking a cigarette, and asks,

"Where'd you get that sandwich?"

"I earned it, Halstead."

I walk a long way. Through the streets as they first dapple, then turn black with the rain. The college boys and girls stagger out of corporate chain bars, breaths sweet like Appletinis or sour like domestic beers. A few blocks away, half-that-sandwich later, I flag down a cab.

"Hey, lady, no food in my cab," he barks.

I look at the sandwich, at the growing puddles, at the sweaty-faced driver, at the impending skyline that signifies the turn of town into something less like a bar district and more like a million condos and a bus line that I'll eventually run into.

"Fuck you," I say. "This sandwich is my heart."

And I keep walking.