

ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Andrew Ehrgood

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Lucy McCurdy

Self-Service
by Lucy McCurdy

I stood, head tilted to the side, staring unblinkingly at my three adversaries. Nerves pooled in my stomach and my hand tightened instinctively around the grip of the paring knife. I was entirely outmatched. There on the platter, at Shari Diamond's Rosh Hashanah party, sat a kiwi, a pineapple, and a cantaloupe. Ms. Diamond had ushered me into her kitchen and then left to go blow-dry her hair. Phone pressed to her ear, she had paused on her way up the stairs. "Honey, cut those into a fruit platter, will you?"

The week before, at the PartyHands training, all of it had seemed so simple. Barbara, the biggest boutique caterer in northwest Washington, was expanding her empire. Her arsenal of cake stands and platters was outgrowing her garage, and with more events than employees on her calendar, she had been driven to hire me, a high school junior with no job experience. But Barbara must have known I was destined to become a success. As she barked out instructions, ("Serve from the left, clear from the right. Always take out the trash. And for the love of God, I'm not going to tie your fucking tie for you!") I had smiled nervously and responded in jerky nods. I was the perfect fit: eager to please and terrified of her. She sent me to my first job without a partner.

So there I was, sporting a crooked Windsor knot, a white button down, and a long black apron, looking like a stupid French waiter and failing my first assignment in Shari Diamond's kitchen. I was 16 years old and had never cut a kiwi before. I stared at it intently with my hands clasped behind my back, as if studying a painting in an art museum. Shari came back down the stairs and paused, noticing that, beyond arranging the fruits in a triangle on the platter, I had made no progress. "Excuse me," I said timidly, feeling like I was peeling off my own skin, "how do you cut a pineapple?"

She shrugged, unfazed. "I don't know honey, Google it."

And there, presented to me during my very first task as a catering professional, was a revelation, the first and most important thing I learned on the job, the answer to dozens of future crises. How do I open a bottle of champagne? Google it. What color is Chardonnay? Google it. How do I set the table when each person gets four forks? My phone is already out of my pocket.

And so I did. I Googled it. With newfound confidence I forced a metal spoon in between the kiwi fruit and its brown skin, revealing the alien green slime ball within. I cut the cantaloupe in half and carved rectangular teeth from its pulpy orange maw. Holding the knife poised over the pineapple, with the WikiHow open on my phone, I was ready to begin enthusiastically dissecting it when Shari's husband entered the kitchen. He looked at the cartoon instructions on

the screen and shook his head, taking the pineapple from me and confidently chopping off the leafy top. “You know,” he said, not unsympathetically, “if you need help with something, you should just ask.”

I opened my mouth to respond and then closed it again. Here was a valuable addendum to my first lesson. To maintain an illusion of competence, Google it where they can't see you, sometimes while rushing through a dim hallway to refill a tray, sometimes discretely under the bar when asked for a cocktail you can't make. In a pinch, the bathroom is the perfect refuge. I smiled and thanked him.

But pretending to be competent at each gig that first year, in a profession that requires an actual skill set, was not always a foolproof strategy. Two trays of three-cheese gougères burned up in the oven at a French wine-tasting party. When I hand-washed fifty dishes in the wake of a roast beef dinner without first scraping the plates, I broke a kitchen disposal. At the CEO of Under Armor's Georgetown mansion, I dropped an entire tray of champagne glasses. Barbara chewed me out regularly at whatever decibel the context permitted: at a kindergarten birthday, loudly behind the moon bounce; during a wedding ceremony, in a scream-whisper behind the coat rack. And while I was initially a subpar employee, ultimately, I managed to improve. I didn't realize it then, but as a teenage girl, I was already in possession of the two most important qualities necessary to becoming an exceptional service professional. I was:

- a) absolutely terrified of embarrassing myself, and
- b) desperate to make everyone like me.

The only thing I lacked was skill, but that was acquirable and I was motivated. To enjoy the privilege of my services for an evening, clients were paying outrageous amounts. Although I earned \$15 an hour, I saw from my invoices that Barbara charged an extra \$30 an hour on top of that. I was required to stay for at least four hours, and a \$40 tip was on the low end of standard. All that cash to have an unqualified and largely unsupervised minor monitor the buffet and keep the champagne flowing. So, if at any given party, the little disasters began stacking up with too great a frequency, I buckled down, Googled things in the bathroom, smiled hard, stayed thirty minutes late to make up for any mistakes, and tucked the roll of cash they handed me as I walked out the door into my pocket without ever being so vulgar as to check the amount. And faster than I expected, I got better. I took Barbara's lessons as gospel and was never confident enough in my job performance to work with leisure. Desperate to make everyone like me and terrified of embarrassing myself, I picked up skills quickly. Soon I was whirling through crowded rooms with a tray full of tuna tartare on crispy wontons balanced above my head. I was leaving behind spotless kitchens and streakless wine glasses. I was popping bottles of champagne with a theatrical flair. And the tips only got bigger.

There was no high like finishing a job, sliding into the driver's seat of my parent's Honda Odyssey, and finding a \$100 bill in my pocket. The moment I slammed the car door, loosened my apron, ripped off my tie, and blasted the radio loud enough to shake the dashboard, I slipped back into myself. Freedom is exhilarating. My cheeks, tired from smiling, relaxed into thoughtless expression. My feet, throbbing from hours of standing, flexed free from black loafers. I sighed in contentment and drove away from mansions, churches, offices, and

downtown apartments, speeding from employers who were demanding, kind, condescending, or strict. And there was such relief. Half of my job was feeling anxious that people didn't like me and doing everything in my power to convince them I was working hard, that I was worth their money and an integral part of their event. But when the clock ran out, the invoice was paid, and a wad of cash sat unfurling in the cup holder, there was no one left to please. And, as the year progressed, the contrast between my uniformed, professional pandering and my off the job, habitual biddability was no longer stark enough to please me. As a result, my two most valuable traits going in were slowly corroded. After many little failures, it took a lot more to embarrass me. And off the clock, when no one was around to tip, I no longer felt the urge to smile at people when I didn't want to.

Over that first revelatory year, I learned that Barbara almost always says what she wants. And after I met her, more than ever before, so did I. The first time I flicked off a stranger in the street I had just left a 10 a.m. first communion party in a spacious suburban backyard. I had served cake to fifteen little kids, poured champagne for their parents, and cleaned up a hundred scattered paper plates and crushed juice boxes. I was tired. As I was walking in front of the 7-11 near my house, where men lean against the wall under the awning, somebody whistled at me. Then came a comment. Maybe "Nice ass." My typical response was to duck my head and walk faster, smiling nervously. But instead, I felt my middle finger pop out of my fist faster than a well-loosened cork on a bottle of Veuve Clicquot. And I smiled because I wanted to.

In Georgetown, outside of the Under Armor mansion, I had left my car for slightly over the legal limit in the parking zone. And sure enough, as I descended the steps toward the street, I spied a parking patrol officer advancing on the minivan with deadly intent. I saw him looking at my license plate and beginning to write me a ticket. I was hundreds of feet away. I yelled. "EXCUSE ME, EXCUSE ME, EXCUSE ME!!" And ran up the street. People were staring. My khakis had large wet stains on them from the tray of champagne glasses I had dropped on myself. I didn't care. The officer looked up, stylus suspended over the electronic machine, clearly annoyed. But something about my unhinged, arm-waving exclamations gave him pause, and as I pulled up to my car, panting heavily, he gave me a dismissive little wave and continued to the next meter. I could read his thoughts clearly on his face: "This one is more trouble than it's worth." Victory.

I began to unleash my inner Barbara everywhere.

At the bank, I didn't let the employee first serve the suited adults who had entered after me because, despite my raggedy sneakers and oversized T-shirt, we were all waiting in the same line. At the restaurant, when my \$15 sausage and cheese, no mushrooms please, omelet—which represented a whole hour of my labor—was served full of mushrooms, I sent it back instead of eating around them. When my grandfather saw a stray romance novel on the coffee table and asked, "Who's reading that trash?" I smiled and told him it was mine. And in the car, I honked at the people still texting when the light turned green instead of waiting for them to look up.

On the clock, I work as hard to be liked as I did every day of my freshman year of high school for free. But catering has made me realize that sometimes, if no one is prepared to slip me a \$100 bill, exhausting myself trying to avoid embarrassment and please everyone I meet isn't worth it.

My waiter is probably a decent guy and even now, I'm not an asshole. But if you can't remember to serve my omelet without mushrooms, don't blame me. As Barbara would say, I'm not going to tie your fucking tie for you. And if you can't figure it out, Google it.