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ENGL 3130

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One Friday Night Serving at Label:

Think About This the Next Time You Sit Down to Eat

Everybody has gone out to eat at a restaurant, but not everybody has waited tables or worked within the service industry before. To customers it might seem like an easy job where all the waiter must do is refill drinks and bring out food. However, pleasing the customers is not always that simple. Sometimes you may not realize you are making your server's job harder, so showing you what happens during a Friday night shift can help provide a better understanding about what a server does on a typical busy night.

I, Brett Strother, am a waiter at Label Restaurant in downtown Johnson City, Tennessee. It is a casual, upscale restaurant that sells everything from prime cut steaks to cheeseburgers, and we even have sushi and seafood choices for people who do not like red meat. Along with an array of food options, we offer hundreds of selections of bourbon with Buffalo Trace being our well liquor, and we have higher end bourbons as well such as Pappy Van Winkle and Whistle Pig. My job as a waiter at Label Restaurant is to give each customer a satisfying experience, and ensure they enjoy the food and drinks they order from our broad selection of menu items. However, pleasing the public can be a challenge because people often do things in restaurants they do not realize are making their server's job difficult.

It is two days before Halloween, so tonight, Friday October 29th, is a perfect time to walk you through a busy shift as a server and shed light on common issues that come with working in the service industry.

4:55 PM

Since I am the closer on this particular night, I am the last waiter to walk through the big glass double doors leading into Label, and I will be taking tables until we turn off the open sign at 11:00pm. As I walk through the restaurant, I make my first stop at the wooden, rustic style host stand to see how the sections are working this evening. There are eight waiters and waitresses on the floor tonight to account for the twenty-nine tables in the restaurant. Each one of us will take care of three to four tables within our section, and although that sounds easy, ninety percent of our tables hold five people or more. For example, I will work four tables, but that means I will be serving around twenty-two to twenty-six different people at a time.

I notice our reservations are full for the night, so I head towards the kitchen. On the way, I pass by our tan, brown leather booths decorated with high end bourbon bottles and American Law Association textbooks. The design of the restaurant invites businessmen and women looking for a place to undo their ties after a stressful workday, but it also attracts families and couples hoping to have a special evening at an upscale establishment without breaking the bank. Due to our daily drink specials, an average dinner for two will cost about \$35 before tip. When I walk through the oak door leading into the kitchen, I go to the Point of Sale (POS) computer, and I clock in by entering the last four digits of my social security number.

5:05pm

The customers are filing in since their work week is over and the holiday weekend is starting. My co-workers and I briefly acknowledge each other's presence in passing because there is no

time for prolonged chatting. We must rush to our tables to offer our customers a cold beverage and the chance to relax, which is their only concern this Friday. The excitement I see on their faces when I set down their first cocktail produces a feeling of jealousy within me. This feeling is one shared among most of the servers because although the customers' work week is over, our shift has just started. On top of working over the Halloween weekend, we spent our week stressing over countless hours of homework and exams while trying to include socializing and exercising into our schedules as well. But, like the rest of my co-workers, I must pay the bills. I put the stress of school aside, smile big, and greet my first table by saying, "Hey, how are you all doing tonight?! My name is Brett, and if you need anything at all while you are here, just let me know!"

5:15pm

The first round of tables is down, and the buzz of a Friday night shift is in full swing. The eight sections each of us is working are filled to the max, and the chaos has started. On top of the normal sections each server usually has, we typically have an additional table outside to serve. Luckily, it is a chilly fall night with rain pouring down, so the patio section is closed. However, the weather is not holding back the wave of patrons ready to take off their fall coats and enjoy a refreshing Dogfish Punkin ale to kick off the Halloween weekend. Starting closest to the kitchen and extending towards the exit, the tables number 21-30, 31-35, 41-45, 61-63, 51-54. Table one is located at the back of the restaurant and table two is nearest the entrance. The tables inside are enough to keep me busy, and I am currently serving a six-top at table twenty-one, a party of twelve at table one, a couple at thirty-one, and another two top at sixty-one.

I know a busy night is ahead of me, but as a broke college kid, I can only hope that means I will pull out a wad of cash from my apron at the end of the night. That is wishful thinking,

because as a server, I do not receive a guaranteed wage. What I am going to walk away with tonight is all in the hands of the family of six sitting at twenty-one, the young couple chatting over glasses of wine at thirty-one, the twelve young adults celebrating their best friend's 30th birthday at my biggest table, and the other couple splitting a Rueben at sixty-one. I sprint back and forth between each table ensuring glasses are filled and stomachs are full to make sure they have a great night at Label. I need them to tip me, so I run around wondering if they know that what they scribble in the "TIP" box will be my only source of income. My manager claims I make \$2.14 an hour, but I have never received a check that proves that claim. Apparently, when earning what my manager calls a "tipped wage", the restaurant does not have to give me a check for the hours I work when my tips exceed a certain amount of money during the pay period. I do not know how that amount is determined, but I do know being tipped is the only way I make money.

6:45pm

The first wave is over with no hiccups, but as the night moves on, the liquor starts to flow. I believe I have made \$50 up to this point; however, I have not had time to check the POS system to confirm that amount. As people increase their alcohol consumption, trying to keep up with everybody's drink order becomes more difficult. The staff starts to feel the stress of the night, but we are running like a well-oiled machine. If you were to take a step back and look at us, we resemble bees working within a hive. We buzz from table to kitchen in a constant circle with either food or drinks in our hands to serve our customers. No steps are wasted, or we will get behind or become "weeded" as we like to call it in the service industry. Being "weeded" is a term used for servers and bartenders when they get behind on taking orders, refilling drinks, or

bringing out food. It is easy to spot a weeded waiter because he will be sprinting around frantically hoping that more problems have not arisen among his tables.

My routine goes in a swift motion to avoid wasting steps. I start at my table twenty-one closest to the kitchen door, move right to thirty-one, bounce back to take the drink order from the ragers still partying at table one, veer around to the new couple sitting at my two-top table at sixty-one, and then I sprint to the bar to retrieve everyone's drinks. I run the drinks back in the reverse order, pop into the kitchen to ring in the food at the POS stations, move towards the line to see if any food needs to be run, and turn around to grab another coke from the drink station for the guy at table twenty-one.

7:10pm

I have been serving tables since I turned eighteen and became legally allowed to serve alcohol. After being in the industry for a while, it becomes quite easy to spot the customers who are going to cause issues or make the job difficult. One of the clearest indicators of this is when the person takes full advantage of "free refills". There are annoying moments serving the public, but nothing makes the job as difficult as hearing the dreaded words, "Can I get another coke?" It seems like a simple task, but as I mentioned earlier, every step matters when waiting tables. When I refill someone's coke, I must walk back to the dish pit, put the glass in the glass rack, head to the drink station, fill a new glass with ice and coke, and then drop off the refilled drink. It throws off the routine I use to prevent getting behind, so after refilling the drink four or five times, the steps add up and eventually cause me to become weeded.

Another family is sitting at table twenty-one. It is a husband and wife with their three young children. The husband asks for a coke, which is not a problem at all. However, after setting down the fizzy beverage and going to check on my other tables, I come back to take their

appetizer order only to see a glass with nothing but ice in it. I knew that table was about to put me in the weeds.

7:35pm

As I anticipated, I am in the weeds, and I bet you can guess who had the most to do with it. I finally got the party animals at table one to leave because there is a reservation there at 7:30pm for another group. However, they did not leave the table until ten minutes before the next reservation was supposed to arrive, so I only had time to clean the table. Since parties of eight or more customers require more time for drink orders, the host and I will usually set the table before they arrive. We set out the menus and silverware, lay out drink napkins so the customers will sit in a specific order around the table, and I set waters on the table as well. This gives me an extra minute or two to ensure my other tables are comfortable because I do not have to immediately greet the party since they have a water to sip on momentarily. That may sound like a short amount of time, but I can make sure every table is settled within two minutes before I take the drink order for the newly arrived party of ten. However, due to the previous table's untimely exit, I was not able to prepare for this new wave of customers.

To make matters worse, the coke guy at table twenty-one is asking for his fifth refill, and the family is just now enjoying their appetizer of pot stickers and garlic fries. My patience is growing thin; however, my wage and job are in the hands of the customer. Even though it is completely unreasonable to pour that much sugar and carbonation into one's gullet throughout a whole day, much less in thirty minutes, I must smile and say, "You got it!"

I grab the coke, swing back around to table one, and take their drink order. As expected by the look of the crew, they all order a different cocktail which is good for my bank account, but not so good since I am crunched for time. I slip my pen and paper back into my apron, sprint

across to drop the coke at twenty-one, and as I am laying it down, one of their sweet, loving children swings his arm to vault his kid's sprite off the table and into the floor. Perfect timing.

8:10pm

That was a tough stretch, but the order is in for table one, the drink is wiped up and the young kid is enjoying his new sprite, his father ran out of steam on coke six, and my other tables cleared out without any issues. I am ready for the other wave, but that past hour has drained me of most of my energy. I head to the bar and grab a Red Bull in hopes of getting enough energy from it to push me through until we close the doors at 11:00pm.

8:30pm

Thankfully, table twenty-one has cleared out. They left me some surprises I missed during the mayhem of their time at Label. One of their children got bored with his coloring sheet on the kid's menu, so to properly entertain himself, he found more enjoyment in ripping up the menu and scattering it around the booth. Along with that, I picked up the check to see a less than average tip; he left a nice \$5 on a \$100 tab after spilling drinks, ripping up menus, and asking for an unreasonable amount of drink refills. Common curtesy is 20% of the bill when tipping your server, and the amount should increase if you make the server's job more difficult or cause issues within the restaurant. At least he is gone now, and \$5 is better than nothing, I guess.

9:00pm

My section is full again, but everything is going smoothly. The six-top at table twenty- one is a group of servers from a local bar who have the night off, so they understand what I am going through on a busy night like this. That also means they know how to tip which is always a reassuring feeling especially after coming up short on the table before them. Table one is a company out to have a good time after a stressful work week. They traded in the cocktails for

bottles of wine to go along with their steaks. After giving them a wine presentation, they refill their own glasses when they start to get low because I leave the bottles with them on the table. It also means their tab is increasingly rapidly, and since it is a party of ten, I can automatically add a 20% gratuity to their bill. Table sixty-one is a young couple from Asheville, and they are only here to split a burger and enjoy a few beers. They are enthralled with conversing among each other, so I only have to check on them when one of their beer glasses gets low. Finally, table thirty-one is having waters and burgers, so they do not need much attention either. Hopefully, the night can stay this way for the next two hours.

10:00pm

What I think is the last wave of tables has enjoyed their meals, and they are now enjoying a couple of our desserts. The company sitting at table one decided to order a few “perfect endings” which is a colossal, sweet treat containing cookies, brownie bites, ice cream, whip cream, Hershey’s syrup, caramel syrup, and is completed with a maraschino cherry on top. After bringing them out to table one, my other tables could not resist the urge to order one of their own, so each table decided to order one for themselves. This seems to be the perfect ending to a busy night.

10:15pm

The crowd of Halloween customers has died off to this point, and it seems as if their attention is more drawn to the pubs rather than the restaurant scene by now. That is fine with me because the last group of tables all treated me kindly once I brought out the bills. We close at 11:00pm, but since it died off at such a rapid pace, the kitchen has decided to close at 10:30pm tonight. With fifteen minutes left to go, I can only hope nobody walks in for a late-night dinner. Another one of those unspoken rules learned within the service industry is you do not walk in to sit down at a

restaurant when they close in thirty minutes. We will serve you, but the kitchen, the hosts, and the waiters and waitresses will not be pleased to see you plopping down into their section at this time of night. It is not because we are too lazy to do our job for the time we are supposed to be there. We do not like people who come in late because after we serve our last table, we have an hour and a half of additional side work to do after the shift. Although we are clocked in and actively working during that hour and a half, we do not receive compensation for the time we spend there once our tables leave.

10:29pm

With only one minute left before we can safely call it a night, a group of five waltzed into the door. I knew it would happen, and as the closer, that means the table is mine. Per usual, as I am greeting the table, the man seated closest to the aisle says, "I apologize for coming in so late sir!" This shows at least they acknowledge we frown upon the ones who come in this late, but I am hard pressed to believe his words since he still chose to walk into the restaurant. However, I kindly accept his apology and begin the process of getting them drinks, getting them fed, and then getting them out the door.

11:30pm

The table is gone. Now I can begin shutting down the restaurant. Ahma, the head chef, showed a high level of distaste when I rang in the last order, but as I bring in their empty plates, we can not help but smile and talk about how happy we are that it is over. And as a good surprise after moaning and groaning about the table coming in a minute before the kitchen shut down, the table gave me a \$50 tip on a \$75 check. I guess I can stay an extra hour for fifty dollars. Finally, all the customers are out the door, and now we get the restaurant ready to do it all again tomorrow.

1:21am

Everything is swept and wiped down, the sauces are filled, the soy sauce bottles are wrapped, and the night is over. All the servers and bartenders relax with a cold beverage, and we exchange our stories about the mishaps and bizarre customers we dealt with tonight. All in all, we enjoy the job we do, and although there are often late nights, the job gives us enough money to pay our bills. We are thankful for all our customers, and each person that walks through the door gives us a new experience. Thanks to the wonderful customers who I served tonight, I am walking out the door with \$315 in tips.

That is a normal Friday night at Label, so next time you go out to eat, consider the stories I have just told you. If your server is busy, tell them everything you will need so they do not have to make two trips, think about savoring that last little bit of coke, and maybe try somewhere different if the establishment closes soon. But if you do want to drink a lot of soda or walk in as they are turning the sign off, be kind to your server and maybe leave a bigger tip. Just like you, we must pay our bills, and every little bit helps.

About the Author:

My name is Brett Strother, and I grew up in a small town, Erwin, Tennessee, nestled in a valley in the Appalachian Mountains. My love for writing and the written word slowly developed over time. I never enjoyed reading and writing until one dark, snowy night when I was seventeen years old. Before that time, my only concern was making good grades in school, and after the bell, I spent my time playing basketball, baseball, or football. Reading and writing was only something I did as a necessity to pass my classes, but while sitting in my den one night during winter break, I became bored as I was locked inside for two or three days until the

snowstorm passed. With nothing to do, my eyes veered over to the dusty pile of books that were gifted to me by my eighth-grade English teacher after many conversations about how I did not enjoy reading. As one last effort to entertain myself that night, I picked up the smallest book in the stack. The front cover read *Child of God* by Cormac McCarthy, and as soon as I read the first page, I did not put the book down until I finished it that night. I immediately fell in love with reading because I was astonished by McCarthy's ability to create the villain of the story, Lester Ballard. From that point forward, I continued reading and came across William Faulkner's *Light in August*. I did not think a fictional story could cause me to completely change the way I looked at society and life. Now, I am a twenty year old student at East Tennessee State University, and I am studying to earn a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in Legal Studies.