

Sushi, smiles and sexual harassment

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For a typical teen, Sunday is filled with schoolwork – students are constantly cramming for that Monday test. For myself, Sunday is filled with shifts at Sushi Ai, and we're fairly busy due to our buy-one-get-one-half-off deal on all-you-can-eat sushi. As a result, I've managed to master bussing tables, seating customers and running six plates of rangoons to three different tables all at once.

Having such a demanding job has made me infinitely grateful for my staff. From the occasional free roll to an extra tip from a server I helped out, the little perks are truly what make the long days bearable. Along with our staff, we have some wonderful customers as well. Just a few Sundays ago, I was clearing an outside table for a couple when they came over to thank me for "always being on top of everything." However, the group that arrived after them behaved differently.

As I collected the last few plates from their table, I looked up and smiled at the customer. He smiled back and said these special words:

"I like your smile. You should smile more!"

To many, this is a compliment, something to boost one's spirit and self-confidence. As a woman who is aware of where it leads, these words made my stomach drop. The man, at least eight years my senior, continues to lean toward his friend, smiling.

"And you've got a nice ass, too."

With my heart pounding, I nervously laughed, avoiding eye contact and stacking cups to take inside. I rushed

back in, away from the man. Before I got near a counter, two cups of water slipped from my grasp. The whole restaurant turned toward me as I rushed to clean it up, panic painted all over my face. It took three employees and a roll of paper towels to make the area dry enough to walk on.

I had acted on my feet in an attempt to professionally exit an uncomfortable situation, but it backfired completely. I had no training to deal with the place I was put in. I was only taught to be kind to "disagreeable" customers. It felt like my job to allow that man to hit on me.

Although this generation is more aware than ever of sexual harassment, it doesn't stop happening. What happened to me was normal in our culture, and it continues to happen day by day. I get winks from men wearing wedding rings and requests for my phone number from older men, even after I tell them I am in high school. But the issues for hosts and waiters don't end there.

I took the job thinking respect would be an expectation. Within my first week, I was proven wrong.

Bussing tables, I found smeared sushi and bills with crosses over the tip lines. Not only is this rude, as I have to clean those rice-ridden tables on nonexistent tips, but it is a disservice to the servers who live off customer gratuity. As a busser, I make \$8. Servers typically make \$3.85, or half of the regular minimum wage. That extra 10-20 percent tip from customers is what makes their living. Unfortunately, people don't always take note of how hard servers work, and their income is diminished by folks who would rather pocket an extra \$6.

So please, let my experience educate you. There are two main lessons to take away: first, DO NOT HIT ON PEOPLE AT WORK. You're essentially exploiting their kindness because they need your service. Second, if you are not going to tip, do not go out. Prioritizing courtesy makes restaurant workers feel like people. As humans, we are prone to ignorance, so it will take self-awareness and compassion to realize that we are used to treating workers unfairly. We as a society MUST change our treatment towards those serving us. ❖



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