

# To the Woman Ordering Salad

**Debbie Chase**

You were so adamant about your salad dressing—insisting that what the server had set in front of you was high fat. You pushed the salad away like it was poison, telling the young woman standing before you that you needed a new dish with only vinaigrette. I was maybe four feet away, but you didn't see me or look up toward the open kitchen where I had prepared your meal. You leaned into your friend across the slim bar table as if in conspirator's whisper, whipped your long straight dyed-black hair behind your shoulders and asked, "How hard is it to get a salad right?" Your yoga clothes hung loosely on your arms and legs, and you jerked your head up to catch the server before she got away. "No bread or croutons. Don't forget."

You leaned back on the padded, wooden booth, crossed your legs, and smiled as your friend dug into her hummus and vegetables, sliding the pita off her plate onto a napkin. I heard you both chatting about your kids, about the activities they had after school: soccer, dance, debate club. Would you have time for a manicure before the afterschool madness began? Your friend cackled as I heard you describe your husband's latest attempt at fixing the persistently running toilet.

I watched you sip your lemon water through the straw, mesmerized by the light that bounced off your shiny hair, and thought about how that could have been—had been me. I had come to this wine bar countless times with my mom or work-friends, ordered a chopped salad and iced tea—glass of white wine on rougher days—and laughed buoyantly with my lunch partner.

But then something in me started to fizzle. I wanted less and more at the same time. I wanted a change—something to take me out of my head. I started looking for a relief valve for the pressure cooker life I'd created for myself.

I had churned forward for so long – starting a consulting business when my first child was born so that I wouldn't have to go into an office and leave him in childcare, having a second child, taking care of a home, cooking nightly family dinners, being a supportive partner to my husband, taking care of my parents when they got sick. All the typical duties of a working mother. Then when my youngest started middle school, I went back to inhouse jobs with travel demands and needy staff to manage. I never really slowed down. I never really knew how to just take a breath. I'd started sitting at the bar writing PowerPoints on my laptop, drinking a little too early in the day. The afternoon salad lunch no longer filled me up.

So when one of the bartenders said they needed line cooks, I thought, what the hell, I can cook. Maybe I could give that a try. I told the bartender I was interested, and he just laughed. "It's hard work back there with all those dudes. Your pretty-little-self will get dirty, sweaty, burned and cut up. You could never handle the pressure." Well, that was all he needed to say. I love a challenge. So I pushed him on it until he finally relented, smirking as he handed me the general manager's email scribbled on the back of a receipt.

I looked at you with your salad, eavesdropping on your laughter and wondered if I ever appeared that confident to someone watching me from the kitchen. I wondered if you felt the same kind of discontent I once did. If you ever felt overwhelmed and underwhelmed simultaneously by your life and the choices you made. If you fielded work calls while in the carpool line to pick up your kids from school. Whether you mentally scoured the contents of the refrigerator during afternoon meetings to see what might be available for you to cook for dinner. If you panicked over the ennui.

I was so excited for my first shift as a line cook, more excited than I'd been about anything in years, and also a little nervous. I packed a ratty t-shirt, old jeans and sneakers into a duffle bag to change into that evening before I left my office job. I tied my mass of curly hair back as I walked into the galley kitchen and surveyed my new coworkers. Gritty men who had been cooking for as long as I'd been managing nonprofit staff. I wondered how they'd feel about a woman working back here, especially one who used to sit at the bar. But they were gracious and patient as they walked me around the cramped airless space, opening the coolers to show me the line of prepped ingredients in bins, the ovens, the flat top, crepe grille, knives hung above the cutting board, meat slicer. And then the tickets started streaming off the tiny machine balanced above the tray of dressings. I watched as my new coworkers kicked into gear, somehow moving quickly between stations to create pizzas, salads, and steaks without talking, throwing them on the line, hitting the bell for the server to pick up food, and then turning back to make the next order. They had me watch so I learned the ingredients that went with each dish, the order to grab them from the bins to maximize efficiency and the way to cook and then plate the food.

We didn't talk. I just watched and learned. And I tell you, it was an incredible exhilarating relief from all the jabbering and analyzing I did all day at my management job. After about two hours, they let me make a hummus plate, correcting me with hand gestures when I put too much feta on top or forgot the olives. But by the fifth or sixth order, I had it down, and they had me move on to pizzas, squatting to get the crust from the bottom cooler, spreading the thin layer of sauce, glancing up at the ticket to see what toppings had been ordered. When I grabbed the giant wooden spatula, scooted it under the pie and slid it into the convection oven, I felt like a pro. I couldn't stop smiling. At the end of my shift, I clocked out and the manager poured me a whiskey. Sweaty and sticky, I slid into a stool at the edge of the bar, looking at the food scraps crusted on my shoes, and felt my spirits soar with my new accomplishment.

My twice weekly shifts quickly became the highlight of my week. Every shift brought something new and unexpected, a fresh skill to master. At first I was afraid of the meat slicer, imagining the menacing metal circular blade taking one of my fingers. But after a few tries, I could slice paper-thin prosciutto to wrap around grilled asparagus with ease, precision, and confidence. So much satisfaction in the mastery of small tasks with such tangible results. A grilled steak perfectly charred, evenly sliced meats and cheeses fanned out on a charcutier board, a crispy edged crepe. I would rush out of my office at 4:30, speed across town, bounce into the bar at 4:55 (always five minutes early) and clock in at the register. This side gig was thrilling.

But then one day, my day-job boss laid me off. It happened at the beginning of our weekly meeting. I willed myself not to cry as I went back to my office, collected my personal items, and sprinted to the door. I sped past my staff and coworkers, imagining they were all smirking at me and my bad fortune, and forced my body to make the walking motions to get me to my car. Everything I

had ever thought about myself came crashing down on me. Every demon. Every judgment. Every mistake. Every choice. It all swirled around me as I drove home. Should I have seen this coming? Was I a bad worker? Was I producing? Was I too aggressive? Was I not assertive enough? Will I ever work again? Was this the end of my career? Was I ever any good at anything?

These thoughts spiraled until I found myself at home in the entrance hall (that's as far as I got) lying on the floor, face down, hugging my knees. I had just turned 54, and now I was laid off. I was not a leader. Not an influencer. No longer an agent of change. I stayed there, fetal positioned, until 4pm when it was time to go into the restaurant for my shift. That's the only thing that got me up—the pull to cook.

I spent the next months in a daze, moving through the humid haze of a St. Louis summer without identity, without purpose. Even with the years as a consultant when the kids were little, my career had been so linear, every move a forward upward movement, but this layoff had sent me hurling down to the bottom. It caused me to question whether what I did mattered. I worked in nonprofits because I thought helping people had value. And, more personally, I thought my strategic mind improved the work and effectiveness of nonprofits. I defined myself as a good person because I was giving back to other people through my work. Now the leaders of this work were telling me I wasn't needed.

On top of that, the restaurant was now my only job. Cooking in a restaurant nourished me because it was my extra gig, my energy, my escape. Like taking a lover for its momentary escape from a spouse, being a line cook was thrilling in its difference from the long-term reality of a career job. But does anyone ever really expect to get stuck with the lover as their partner? Was restaurant work inspiring enough for me to focus on every day? Could I believe in myself as a good person if this were my main job? If I was defining myself as a line cook, I had to think about what that meant, what I really thought about this kind of work and whether it provided value.

Before I worked as a line cook, I never thought about what the people making the food endured—the risk of the meat slicer, the heat of the kitchen. And when I saw you casually sending your food back to be redone, I realized I had been you—expecting someone else to fix my food (or my car or a leaking toilet) without giving any real attention to who those people were or what they might be going through. I earned \$14 an hour as a line cook. Your salad cost \$16.95. My coworkers couldn't afford to buy the meals they prepared. I never thought about any of that until I started restaurant work. So much churned through my head when I saw you. The need I'd had to try something else but also how little I'd known about the work back here, when I only sat out there.

Summer at a wine bar is madness. Customers stream in before concerts and after ballgames. I lost myself in the onslaught of cheese boards and pizzas and sweat. In the middle of a 9pm rush, when I hadn't looked up from the cutting board in three hours, when I hadn't even had time to go to the bathroom, I found myself smiling, even laughing. The physicality of it got me out of my head. The immediacy made it impossible, for a while, to worry about anything else.

But then I saw you sitting so nonchallantly and pristinely in front of your low-fat, low-carb salad and I got a flash of what I used to be. How I used to define myself. And I wondered if I'd always been irrelevant enough to fire, invisible enough to make food for other people without

acknowledgement. Or was possible that what I did for work did not define me? Was there a chance that my value was not dependent on being seen or appreciated by other people? If I was someone who found value in doing good, could there be good in work that went unseen?

When I finished preparing the new salad—crouton free with just a splash of red wine vinegar—I took it out to you. I walked the four steps from the kitchen to your table and set it gently at your place. You didn't look up. Just put on your glasses to inspect for accuracy, turned it around to ensure no undesirable ingredients, reached for your fork, and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

**Author Bio:**

**Debbie Chase** is a writer, nonprofit strategy consultant, restaurant cook and mother. She writes about work and its intersection to class, race and motherhood. Her work has appeared in *Cincinnati Review*, *Jacobin Magazine*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Motherly* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.