

Lives of the Great Waitresses

BY NINA SHENGOLD

In a "greasy spoon" restaurant, Kay is rolling flatware in napkins. She is a black woman in her forties. She is "born again." She talks to the audience.

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KAY: You either got it, or you don't. If you don't, you won't ever. So don't even bother. Don't strain. Oh, there's things you can learn, sure. The fine points. The stance. "Heat that up for you?" "Toasted?" But honey—scratch that, make it hon—a truly great waitress is *born*.

You get what I mean? It's a feel thing. Deep under the bones of your bones. In your cells. Some reporter once asked Louis Armstrong what "swing" meant. Louis looked the guy dead in the eyeball and said, "If you gotta ask, you'll never know." *He* would've made a great waitress.

My very first diner, we had one. Flo Kelly. A goddess in Supp-hose. Flo was all waitress. She could fill two dozen shakers one-handed and never spill one grain of salt. She could carry eight Hungry Man specials lined up on her arm like a charm bracelet. Flo could serve pie à la mode so it looked like Mount Everest topping the clouds. She poured gravy like tropical rain. In Flo's maraschino-nailed fingers, the short-order carousel spun like the Wheel of Fortune, and never, not once, did a customer's coffee get cold.

Well, I mean to tell you, that diner was *hers*. If Jesus Himself Amen came in and sat down to supper, he would've tipped double. Then one Blue-Plate Special, right after the lunch rush, Flo hung up her hairnet, cashed in her checks, and went sunny-side up. And that's when the Lord took my order. I knew what I was. I was called.

(She steps closer.)

Look in my eyes. I know mysteries way beyond menus. I have felt the Lord's love pierce my heart like a skewer through gyros. I have seen Jesus weep ice-kold milk with a K.

(She holds out her hand.)

Heat that up for you? Hon?