

Flashback at the Fast-Food Counter

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Halfway through my eight-hour shift as a volunteer concession stand worker at the university stadium, a woman wearing leather pants stood at my sticky work counter and ordered a large fries. "No," said the woman at my counter. "Make that cheese fries. And a large Coke."

I explained nicely: No cheese fries. No Coke. Just plain fries and Pepsi.

We had been briefed hours earlier by a stadium employee, a nice guy in a T-shirt splattered with mustard stains. Basically, we would be operating a fast-food restaurant. Having worked at McDonald's 20 years earlier I vaguely remembered prep: Turn on the fry vats, plug in the grills.

My son attends a preschool on the campus where my husband and I work as professors, and I only wanted to help raise a little cash for a music teacher and maybe a few playground swings.

A group of preschool parents had agreed to work a concession stand and walk away with 10 percent of that stand's profits. I thought I would be merrily handing out bubbly sodas to good-natured fans and alumni, chatting with the other parent volunteers, catching a few game plays.

Instead, there I was, a grown woman in a paper hat, knee deep in teen anxiety, smiling thinly and saying, "May I help you?" to an endless line of anonymous fans, plunging cardboard buckets into mountains of popcorn previously cooked in a factory in Ohio.

But I didn't explain any of this to the leather lady. "You got cheese for nachos, right?"

I checked behind me. There was indeed a gallon can of orange goop floating in tepid water.

I agreed to dump nacho cheese on her fries. "But wait," she said. The line behind her rumbled.

"Here's how I want it." She explained: Place a few fries in the paper cup. Pour in some cheese. Add some fries. More cheese. Top with fries and a ladle of cheese.

"A cheese fry parfait?" I asked dubiously. During her elaborate directions I had dispensed her soda and slid it across the counter. She sipped it while I scrambled to the backroom fryer, begged another parent volunteer to fill it half-way, ran to the front to ladle cheese. Back to the fryer. And so on until I arrived back at my station, elated at the thought of her moving on.

"I ordered diet," she said. "I could sue you. I'm allergic."

I stared her down. Sue me, my hat! I thought of taking the soda and pouring it on her head. It' just a football game, I wanted to tell her. I'm just a parent. I teach college kids -- probably yours -- how to write. That's all.

"Got salt somewhere?" she demanded, munching on a fry. I got her another soda.

Eight p.m. Still no break in the line. A former student wearing sporty sunglasses with a good-looking girl on his arm ordered pretzels and never even recognized me. The ridiculous hat. The cheese sauce on my elbow. Couldn't be his English instructor.

Orders were enormous, and the machines did not tabulate items. It made no sense to me that the cash registers did not list the items on a big screen as I punched them -- especially at a sporting event, where one person inevitably volunteers to make a food run for a party of 20.

Soon, I forgot all about the sweet preschoolers and their waiting swing set. Instead, my mind wandered back to my adolescent days when my stubbornness got me neck deep in trouble at McDonald's. "You don't smile enough," said my boss. I argued that people don't want smile. Don't want chitchat. They want their all-beef patties fast. And that's it. And don't get me started on the extra squeeze of special sauce I put on the bun and the extra second I let the fries cook to achieve a better crunch.

I might have been right, of course, and I was the fastest worker they had, but the point was lost on me that conforming and following rules was 90 percent of the game. It took me many years to understand this, and despite all those years of masquerading as polite, reasonable adults, in the stadium that night I was a little shocked, maybe even mortified, to know that our core teen personalities are easily retrievable.

A few seconds after Ms. Leatherette left, a volunteer parent, a professor in the geology department, sidled up to me to offer sympathy as I pulled a new soda for another customer. "One more second," I said, too loudly, enough to let my voice be known, "and I would have killed her."

Twenty years earlier, a crew chief would have reprimanded me for a comment like that. But on this day, the customer who had stood behind her all those long minutes laughed and said, "Me too."

As a teenager I would have exalted in his validating comment. As an adult, I smiled politely, handed him some sticky change, and signaled to the next customer, a regular sort of woman in a sweatshirt who wanted only a large drink: 3/4 cola and 1/4 lemon lime.