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## The Diner

Catherine Agar  
*St. John Fisher College*

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# The Diner

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I was in high school when I started waiting tables at The Diner; it was my first "real" job after several years of regular babysitting. The Diner was owned by a Greek man who had a pregnant wife and two toddlers. I have heard that Greeks only come in big families, but all we ever saw were those four, going-on-five people, who came in once a week, took the biggest booth, ordered enough food for all the relatives, and left forty percent of it on the floor."

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## CATHERINE AGAR

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### THE DINER

I was in high school when I started waiting tables at The Diner; it was my first “real” job after several years of regular babysitting. The Diner was owned by a Greek man who had a pregnant wife and two toddlers. I have heard that Greeks only come in big families, but all we ever saw were those four, going-on-five people, who came in once a week, took the biggest booth, ordered enough food for all the relatives, and left forty percent of it on the floor.

My uniform was a too-short turquoise rayon dress with “The Diner” machine embroidered over one pocket and a slippery white apron, both of which hung on a hook in the bathroom, where I changed by squeezing into the tiny space between the toilet and the stacked boxes of paper placemats, with the string from the overhead light bulb, brushing my face like an invisible hair.

The kitchen opened directly onto the dining room through a long, narrow window with a wide sill for plates. The cook was so surly that I never discovered whether he spoke English. The other waitress, Lorraine, would hand him a ticket with something written on it that looked like a belt buckle monogram and get her order up quick, hot and correct. I would give him a ticket with “*Ham Sand.*” neatly printed and end up with grilled ham and cheese when the customer wanted a club.

Lorraine showed me the ropes, the “ropes” being how to take the uneaten rolls from people’s plates and stuff them back in the warming drawer, something the owner apparently wanted us to do. She also ate food people had left over, scooping a piece of meat or a whole baked potato onto a fresh plate. She didn’t mention whether the owner wanted her to do that. The rules were that I was not allowed to sit down or go to the bathroom unless I was on break. Lorraine could do whatever she wanted.

Some of her customers, elderly ladies, once left seven pennies on the table after their meal. The next time they came in, Lorraine marched over to their table, said, “You must need these more than I do,” and smacked the pennies down in front of their startled faces.

We had one regular. He was about sixty years old, balding, with a fringe of grey hair around the perimeter of his head like a partial hat. He wore grey suit pants, lightly stained shirts, yellow ties with wide diagonal stripes, and knobby shoes. Lorraine called him “honey” in a voice like a Formica countertop. When she brought his meal, she clapped his plate down in front of him.

Almost as soon as I started at The Diner he became *my* regular, since Lorraine didn’t want to waste her time on someone who left a dollar tip. She referred to him as “Old Rose” because he always ordered a glass of rosé wine, only he pronounced it “rose,” like the flower. He sat in the last booth. After I’d waited on him a few times I asked how he was and what the weather was doing out there, and he would ask me what was good on the menu. Since the truthful answer to that was “nothing,” I hedged. Invariably he ordered the special anyway. I would bring him a square of meatloaf with a dull red glaze on top, a clot of mashed potatoes, and canned green beans. Or an open-faced turkey sandwich with gelatinous gravy and Wonder bread. He would eat his

dinner, finish up with a cup of coffee (free with meal) and a half-price, orphaned piece of yesterday's pie, pay his bill, leave one dollar on the table for me, and go. He came in every night.

Business was slow, usually, so I fussed with the coffee pot, making fresh coffee that would end up reheated for the next day's breakfast customers; wiping down the surfaces; trying to figure out which rolls in the warming drawer were used and throwing them away. I could see Old Rose reflected in the shiny steel of the coffee machine. He just ate.

It poured one night when the air was cold enough for breath smoke. The rain streamed down the plate glass windows. It was getting dark earlier—between the onset of winter and the rain, the outside was a smear of grey shapes and wavering headlights. We had put up some silver garland, draping it over the shake machine and the pie case, and someone had taped up a couple of cardboard Santa faces with alcoholically red noses. No one but Old Rose came in that night. I brought the coffee pot to his table too early, just for something to do, but he waved it away. I noticed an indent on his left ring finger. I stood there a moment, hesitating. When I turned to look at the kitchen window, the cook slowly stepped to the side so that only one dark eye showed. It was fixed on me.

I went back to the counter. I wiped coffee grounds from around the machine, straightened up the sugar packets, filled the extra salt shakers, picked straw papers off the carpet. Lorraine sat in a corner booth, clutching a cup of bitter coffee and reading the newspaper. The cook was smoking in the kitchen.

I was an unmotivated student, but occasionally real work was demanded of me, and I had a social studies project due and an English paper to fudge, as well as my own Christmas shopping to finance. Babysitting not only paid better than waitressing, it was easier, and I could do homework at the same time. Plus I liked children a whole lot better than I liked the cook.

It seemed to me that The Diner wasn't the kind of place you quit. It was more the kind of place you drifted away from, like when you were a kid on the lake in an inner tube and accidentally-on-purpose ended up out of earshot. I could probably just not show up the next day, and Lorraine and the cook would shrug that I was a lousy waitress anyway. Or I could tell Lorraine I wasn't coming back, and she'd say, "Okay, see ya, kiddo," and that would be that. I stood there wiping the clean counter, turning the idea over, listening to the rain and the muffled sshish-sshish of cars going by. In the coffee machine I could see Old Rose staring out the window, watching the rain sheet down.

I untied my apron and pulled it off. In the bathroom, I slid into my jeans and pulled my shirt over my head, not bothering with the buttons. I hurried down the narrow hall and out into the dining room, but I was too late. Old Rose had gone. On the table was a dollar bill, and on his plate an uneaten baked potato. I tucked the dollar into my pocket, then scooped the potato up and dropped it in the trash on my way out the door.