

## Neon

I remember the first time I saw someone die at Neon. There would be another. His name was Oswalder Henderson. No one questioned if it was his birth name. He was a tower of a man, who looked like Elton John if Elton John had been a football player. Even in his old age (I pegged him at somewhere around 70) he was still an immense figure. He wore elaborate, multicolored designer suits, and always came in with a matching hat. On the night I saw him die, his hat had a long feather in it. It looked as if it could have been a quill. I never asked what he did for a living; the quill made me think he might have been a writer. A particularly successful and eccentric one, that is. Maybe all the successful ones turn out to be eccentric. But then again, his name wasn't familiar to me outside of his previous visits to Neon. He always dined alone, except on his last night, when he was with another man, younger than him, but not by too much.

I remember he picked up the jellied cube on his plate and inspected it as if looking through a magnifying lens to examine a diamond for flaws. I had told him and his guest, when I dropped the plate in front of them with the two perfect, square-inch cubes, that they would learn what it was after the following course, as both courses were meant to coincide. His guest ate the cube first, and reacted positively, though subdued compared to what I expected. Oswalder then plucked his cube with chopsticks and placed it into his mouth like a dental hygienist inserting a suction tube. I watched his eyes go wide. We knew, from his profile, he had no allergies. He chewed slowly, appearing deeply affected by the experience. After he finally swallowed the morsel, he stood up and declared in his mighty basso, "It's perfect! It's perfect! The taste! That's it! That's the taste! Mother!" The whole room froze. All guests at Neon eat the same courses at the same time, but no one had quite reacted so expressively. Then he winced; he grabbed his

Derek Fisher

chest and collapsed into his chair, clearly in distress. His friend helped him lie on the floor. I stood against the wall, and watched. Other staff jumped into the scene to help, but I couldn't move. His breathing continued to intensify. The other guests in the small room stood by as someone called an ambulance. It didn't arrive in time.

I remember the first time Chef Le Main called me by my name. When I first started, he usually called me Bitch, if anything at all. But that became confusing because he also referred to Rachel as Bitch. She was much taller than me, so he switched my name to Short Bitch. I still had long hair at the time, otherwise I'm sure he would have called me Bald Bitch, or something like that. Everyone had such nicknames. Darnell was Blacky. April was Month. One day he called me Barbarella. I didn't understand why, but I certainly preferred it to Short Bitch. It stuck for roughly a week. Then one day out of the blue he called me Nifty. I didn't assume that he had known my name the whole time; he must have asked someone. There was a girl that worked in the kitchen here for a month, to whom he referred exclusively as Faggot. One day she became upset, and began crying while reducing rhubarb water before clarifying it, not because of Chef's insults, but because earlier that day she had learned that her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She took off her cook's hat, in a moment of exasperation, inadvertently letting her hair down, and Chef said, "My god! You're a girl? Ha! I had no idea." He still called her Faggot until she stopped working there.

I remember the first time Sophie showed me the wires. She'd been cagey the whole day, and before the beginning of service she pulled me aside and showed me the gash in her arm. She'd cut herself on a jagged piece of metal on the walk-in fridge, after Chef Le Main had to hammer the door open when he lost his key. The cut was deep, and she had kept it duct-taped and hidden under her sleeve. She showed it to me because she was worried. I looked in the

Derek Fisher

wound and saw an assortment of grey, yellow, and chrome wires. “Isn’t it cool?” she said. I told her I thought it was very interesting.

I remember the dining room at Neon. To call it a dining room is disingenuous. To call this disingenuous is putting it too mildly. Dining room is something you picture in a house, where mother, father, son, and daughter sit and eat roasted beef and mashed potatoes and green beans while discussing their days. Son avoids questions about what he learned. Daughter excuses herself early because her boyfriend is on his way to take her out. Mother drinks more wine than she should to mask the fact that she hates father. Father wades in his own impotent, invented context of power. This thing that we call the dining room, it doesn't belong in the terminology of what we really do. But if it must be the default, nowhere was the term more a betrayal of truth than at Neon. It was an art gallery and a dungeon. A chamber of wonders. A dreamscape. It was small. Two long tables. All guests, never more than 20, sat together for one seating. Nothing brings strangers together like sharing the planet’s most ambitious culinary experiments. The scents inside the room fluctuated as the meal progressed, tuned perfectly to guide the guest toward the next course. But nothing stood out more than the lights. Pulsating hypnotic colors. The endless luminant buzz, the enveloping warmth. I dream in neon, in purple, in electric night. Natural sun is an assault, Chef said. The room had no windows, regardless of where we were in the city. Every week, service moved to a new, secret location. And every week, the room was the same. The relocation efforts alone required a whole massive staff, but the rest of us still took part. I remember moving slabs; waking up at 4 AM to ride with the trucks; kitchens changed, but Chef adjusted with mind-boggling efficiency. Mise en quel place? The colors, I never quite got used to them. No one did. Maybe that was the point.

I remember James. Or Jamie. Boy or girl? I seem to have trouble remembering that detail, and I can't understand why. I wish I could explain myself. He or she started working there shortly before me. He was a starrer. She would lock eyes with me and wouldn't avert the gaze before me. It was unnerving. The eyes were undeniable, gorgeous, almost inhuman. Especially in that room. Did he/she have long hair or short? Breasts? Delicate, thin arms, or bulging biceps? I don't remember. But I remember the eyes with every fiber of my memory. I think of them when I need to feel warm and safe. Chef watched her look at me. Chef watched me look back at him, at James. Jamie. Identity unclear. Will confirm sooner or later. Chef caught those glances every time.

I remember the night the Polish soccer star Tomas Berenholz came to Neon. He had tears in his eyes the entire meal. His wife rubbed his back while he chewed and cried. It became a more somber evening than we were used to. When I cleared the second to last dessert course, he held my arm. He told me that his grandfather escaped Poland just as the Nazis had invaded. His parents and three sisters were never to be seen again. He travelled east and made it to the Russian border, where the soviet army interrogated him and accused him of being a Nazi spy, so they imprisoned him in Siberia for two years, in the Gulag. He watched every friend he made starve to death over the course of those two years. He told me that his grandfather never spoke about this experience, except for one night when he got drunk at a family gathering and recounted his most memorable moment from his time in the Gulag. A cat wandered into his cell that night. It was mangy and skittish, with gray-white fur and whiskers on only the right side of its face. It saddled up beside him. Tomas reiterated to me that this was his grandfather's most memorable moment because, that night, he was able to eat a real meal. Tomas cried while telling this story, still holding my arm, as his wife rubbed his back, and said in broken English, "Zaida ate stray cat

Derek Fisher

so I can eat the best meal on this planet earth." His face glowed purple, and the tears that streamed down his cheeks appeared dyed the color of setting suns. At the end of the night, once the guests were gone, I told Chef Le Main the story. He took a very serious look, and said he would include stray cat on the menu one day.

I remember, when I was younger, we lived in a sea-side beach town, the name of which escapes me. The sun was always setting or close to setting. At least that's how I remember it. The horizon was always pink-orange. The temperature was always perfect. We ran on the beach. We had no troubles. I think of this place often.

I remember there were no rules in the dining room at Neon. Guests could smoke, take drugs, or act lewd in whatever ways they felt like. Most people maintained decorum and acted reasonably, probably because they were in awe of their surroundings and were willing to relinquish power to the otherworldly legend, Chef Le Main. But not all deferred. A drug dealer waited until course five or six, when people were already halfway drunk, and began selling cocaine to guests. They partook right in the moment. This proved disastrous for the meal, as their appetites were ruined, so Chef Le Main adjusted as best he could. Everything came out of the kitchen in liquid form. The guests drank their meals, their formerly enervated faces now manic with delight and frenzy, until they could drink no more. Chef spoke to the dealer privately, and told him next time to bring weed, not coke. I remember once a man smoked a gargantuan cigar throughout the entire meal, filling the dining room with thick, acrid smoke. The room could not assert itself, sensorially, the way it should. Chef Le Main adjusted, changing the menu in real time as best he could. We were all confused. We didn't know our drop lines. Course seven came out. The cigar-smoking man chortled through each bite, smoke blossoming out of his mouth and nose, sharing space in his cavities with the masticated morsels. By the time course eight came

Derek Fisher

out, he had excused himself. He tried to eat course nine, but returned to the bathroom again. I told Chef. He simply shrugged his shoulders, and gave the subtlest of winks. As I left the kitchen he said, "Maybe you should snub out his cigar. He may not be back."

I remember the time James or Jamie didn't show up for work for two weeks. I asked people if they knew where he was, but no one did. I found reactions to my question confusing, and even in some cases unsettling. They all said things like, "Oh, I hadn't really noticed she was gone." I asked Chef Le Main, but he told me never to ask questions regarding front of house staffing, which I found odd because he was the Chef that I had worked for in my life that tended to have the most interest in his front of house staff. Then, like nothing had happened, Jamie and James was back. I asked him where he went. She said she had taken time off. I was so relieved to be able to look in her blue eyes again.

I remember when the terminally ill artist Anastasia Pelon brought her whole family to Neon for one last dinner together. We had been expecting a room full of eccentricity, full of chaos, full of the infusions that such a prominent artist would have inevitably left on her closest family members, especially in the shadow of her immanent death. But what we got was something much different; a room full of working class, down to earth, polite people, who all happened to be this woman's family. There was never an unsmiling face around the room. These parents, siblings, and cousins were so happy to be together. Anastasia's sister helped her whenever she needed to use the bathroom or stretch her legs. Her sister would carry her oxygen tank as they walked together, holding each other's arm. I remember the expectation that the whimsical and ferocious aesthetic that imbued her art would reveal itself in the room, but no. The bloody, bodily, confrontational, qualities of her work had no role here. There was only love. Between the last savory course and the first dessert course, a brief pause came to the service and

Derek Fisher

a projector was wheeled in, so that the family could share memories. The pictures showed them together at various times in their life. We were all withdrawn, mournful. But they, the family, were so full of life and hope, despite their impending loss. Near the end of the final course Anastasia became ghostly white. She grabbed her chest, and her breathing shortened. Everyone at the table stood up, panicked. Her father shouted, "This is it!" Her sister held her, attempting to lie her down, and Anastasia began laughing. She laughed so hard that chunks of Mille-Feuille flew out of her mouth. Family members laughed and sighed, as did we. "You people just make it so easy," Anastasia said, coughing. James/Jamie watched the family leave the restaurant, thanking us and Chef, elated, already grieving. We held each other's hands as tightly as we could. We thought of our own families. Jamie/James didn't say this, but I imagined her/him saying, "This is our family now."

I remember the woman with the swan. She wore it on her head like a hat. We'd seen animals in here, live ones. The swan appeared stuffed, but something about it felt very much alive. She said, "If that slobbering popcorn pixie Bjork can wear one as a dress for the Oscars, I can wear a real one on my head. Eat your heart out, Norway, or wherever." People laughed. Her husband said, "Dear everyone knows Bjork's from Iceland." I couldn't help myself, and said, "She's eaten here, you know." The swan atop this grey-haired woman's head may not have moved all night, but I could have sworn that it was looking at me. Every time I entered the dining room, I felt its eyes digging into me. I asked James/Jamie if he/she felt it too. They said yes, they certainly did.

I remember wondering if I had wires. I remember contemplating whether I should look.

I remember the room, after what must have been my fortieth week, beginning to feel like a cave, like a dungeon from which there was no escape. The lack of natural light was affecting

us. Our moods were becoming erratic. People tended not to leave their job at Neon; it was too prestigious. People left Neon all the time; it was too high-pressure. I spoke to Jamie and James about the increasingly unnerving feeling that the walls were caving in. They both felt the same way.

I remember having a disagreement with Chef about something. Something trivial. What exactly, I don't recall. During the argument he stopped referring to me as Nifty and resumed calling me Bitch. I said to him, "Don't talk to me like that." He looked stunned, beside himself. "What did you say?" he asked, not sarcastically. He was genuinely unsure if he heard right. I said, "I said don't talk to me like that." He swallowed hard. He appeared as if something dreadful had happened. He left the kitchen.

I remember all-you-can-eat caviar night. Chef decided impulsively that the first course after the amuse bouches would involve an indefinite sequence of 250-gram tins of Beluga caviar, served family style, with blini, and vintage Krug champagne. If a tin of caviar was finished, the guests were not to be asked if they wanted more; a new tin was to be brought immediately. If a champagne glass was empty, it was to be refilled. Only when all twenty guests in the dining room agreed that they were done were we to move on. When we told chef that the restaurant would lose thousands of dollars in execution of this plan, he threw his cleaver at the wall and told us not to question him. He said he was in the mood for excess. James or Jamie and I agreed, Chef may have been starting to lose his sense of reality. Our guests that night happened to be particularly excessive, and particularly hungry. 26 tins of caviar, 16 bottles of Krug, and 2 hours later, we progressed. It was nearly 10 P.M. when we cleared away the last of the empty tins, some still lined with scatterings of tiny black pearls. Guests were spilling, slouching, screaming, laughing. A glass broke. Then another. We slipped in seamlessly, of course, to remove any

evidence of disorder or destruction, but still, this felt different, as if things might be unraveling. I could see Chef popping his head into the dining room from time to time. He had never done that before. Sure, he would come in and speak to guests here and there, famous actors, hedge fund managers, princes, models that insisted on complimenting him personally, but on those occasions his presence was always deliberate. This was different.

I remember that night vividly because it was the night that James and Jamie and I decided we would leave Neon. Sure, we were in the middle of Asia, in Singapore, a city where we had no other connections. But we agreed it was time. And it had to be together. We needed each other. James/Jamie said that he/she would come to work one day soon with a shaved head, and that would be the signal, the last shift, the moment we would walk out together. The word I kept wanting to use, every time I spoke to this person, whose face is now a grey static fuzz, was escape. I retreated to a bathroom near the end of service, at nearly three in morning, with a fish-filleting knife I stole from a cook, and I put the blade to my hair. But, somehow, Chef must have found out about our plan. Because the next night, when I arrived at the restaurant, ready for the coup, there was no one there except Chef. He took me into the kitchen and told me service had been called off for the evening. His meat cleaver sat a few feet away from him, from us, on the prep table. Its presence was ominous, especially given that everything else was spotless. There were no other knives or plates or items of any kind lying around. Just the cleaver. I asked him why service was cancelled and he said, "Because certain things had to happen." He looked me in the eyes. And I understood. "Nifty," he said. "You're the best we could ever have. The best. There's never been anyone better." I understood. I nodded my acknowledgement. He took me by the arm and led me to a little closet just outside the kitchen. He opened it, showing me the mess inside. Liquids and parts. A disembodied smile. Wires. "You see?" he said. I nodded. "Had to

Derek Fisher

happen," he said. "No choice at all." I nodded. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Things must stay the way they are. That's how we make everything function." I nodded. I stared at the mess in front of me.

I remember sitting in the empty dining room, with the regular lights on, the walls black. I remember thinking, this is my home. This is my home. This sunless box. I didn't know the time. I tried to relish in the solitude, to breathe it in, but the walls always felt as if they were edging closer and closer, and soon enough I would be crushed. I pictured the ocean. I pictured the trees. I pictured my sea-side childhood town. I could almost smell the salt-water. I closed my eyes and imagined the ocean.

It's getting dark now. I should probably turn in.

I've made a decision. Tomorrow I will look inside myself, and see if I have the wires. If I do, maybe I will show them to a guest. I haven't decided yet.

Chef would be very mad at me if I did that. But something inside me has changed. I can't explain it. Something in me... I don't feel the urge to serve anymore. Maybe something good will happen.