



The Golden Egg

My parents loved to eat out and we were regulars at many restaurants in Montevideo. But no one in our community ever worked at one. It simply wasn't done. Kids like me were not expected to take menial jobs during our summer vacations—a very sensible custom observed in other countries—and I grew up thinking that sort of work was taboo. Things changed when I was flat broke in London in my early twenties and couldn't find a job. Not the kind of white-collar job I aspired to, at any rate.

One grey day I was trudging home after another round of fruitless applications in the city and walked past a Golden Egg restaurant near my flat in Paddington. There was a 'Help Wanted' sign in the window and at that moment I chose to ignore the old taboo. I was young, a long way from my community's conventions, and in urgent need of funds.

I started right away as a waiter and loved it. The wage was minimum, but the tips were great once I got the hang of things. I had what my brother dismissed as "the gift of the gab," which was a handy skill in my new field. I soon realized that, in a sense, I had already been trained for the job, or part of it anyway. My only work experience at that point was as an account executive at a couple of advertising agencies in Montevideo. My role there was to be the middleman between the agency, especially the creative department, and the client. In my new reality, the kitchen was the creative department, and the customer was the client. Other parts of the job, on the other hand, were totally unfamiliar.

Carrying a tray, for example. It sounds easy, but it's not. Carrying trays out from the kitchen means keeping them level so food doesn't spill on the way to the table. If there are drinks involved, good balance is even more critical. Trays were then left on a stand against the wall, a place to put things when tables were cleared. Once a tray was full of dirty dishes it was surprisingly heavy, and its shifting loads

could be treacherous. On one of my trips back to the kitchen some carelessly stacked plates started sliding about and next thing there was a deafening crash and an embarrassing mess to clean up. Conversation in the restaurant came to a stop, and then there was a quick round of applause. Small consolation while the manager stood there glowering at me.

Friends would occasionally come in for a meal. All of them respectably employed in the white-collar world. They would taunt me in good-natured ways, and I would serve their glasses of water with my thumb immersed up to the second knuckle. Later in the evening I would eat a similar meal for just a fraction of the price they paid. I learned that, when short of funds, it's good to work where you can eat for very little money.

After a night shift I'd walk home through the quiet streets. On the way there was a 24-hour arcade with a couple of one-armed bandits. I got into the habit of putting any coins I was carrying into the slot and pulling the lever. Once I'd invested all my coins, I'd retrieve my earnings and be on my way, whether I was ahead or behind, financially speaking. My mind would wander back to casinos in Uruguay where I once played roulette in elegant rooms that mimicked Monte Carlo.

Those walks helped me develop a perspective on my circumstances. I was grateful for the income I'd been unable to find in the advertising world. Working as a waiter opened my mind by showing me what life was like on the other side of that old taboo and taught me that all honest work is honourable in its way. In retrospect, the experience helped me work through some mental baggage and freed me from a convention that no longer made any sense.