

## COMMIS



WHEN THE CALL CAME FROM MY BROTHER, I wasn't the least bit surprised. The only wonder was that they'd lasted this long, into the dog days of August. But now, my parents had decided to close their restaurant for good, my brother told me, and they wanted me—their fugitive daughter—to come home to Missouri to help them shut it down.

I didn't have much going on to excuse me. Like most people in the food-service industry that Covid year, I'd been furloughed in March 2020 and then laid off. I'd been living off unemployment, collecting more money, actually, than I had as a commis cook at BoYo, the fine-dining izakaya in Old City, thanks to the extra six hundred dollars a week the government was doling out. The first month of the shutdown, I had lazed around my apartment in South Philly as if on vacation, thinking BoYo would reopen at any moment. After running out of shows to stream and growing bored with baking focaccia, my two roommates—both prep cooks at other restaurants—and I began incubating artisanal products for possible side hustles. We molded candles and soaps, fermented vinegar and kombucha, infused edibles, pickled beets and okra, assembled bentos to sell in the corner bodega, and macerated citrus, nuts, seeds,

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and herbs for Italian liqueurs—limoncello, nocino, amaro.

Then George Floyd was murdered, and our summer became all about activism, marching up and down the parkway between City Hall and the Museum of Art, repeatedly taking a knee, getting teargassed and pinned on I-676, followed by volunteering for neighborhood clean-ups, meals on wheels, food banks, and cookouts for the homeless. As the election neared, we turned to canvassing and making calls and writing postcards and going out to rural PA to register voters.

But when the federal subsidy program expired at the end of July, we had to shift to more mundane concerns, like how to pay the rent. We started looking for kitchen jobs. There was nothing. The only places that were hiring were grocery stores, pharmacies, warehouses, and delivery services. I kept getting rejected. I was turned down for four different positions at Target, including cart attendant. Everyone was looking, which made finding an entry-level job as a stocker or picker ridiculously competitive, companies asking for relevant experience.

The only experience I had was at my parents' Chinese restaurant and at BoYo, the latter acquired through pluck more than luck. After I graduated high school in May 2018, I'd immediately fled to Olney, a Korean American neighborhood in North Philly, where a cousin lived (I had told my parents I'd only be there for a short visit). On my second night in town, I set off to get a job at BoYo. I'd already tried calling and emailing and sending in my résumé, to no avail. I needed another tactic to get in the door. So I dressed up, put on makeup, and went there pretending to be a customer.

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The restaurant was a square box, sleek and elegant, with wide plank oak flooring, black wainscoting, brick walls painted gray, and exposed ceiling joists. It was very dark in there, with just one narrow picture window facing the street, but up-lighting and recessed mini-spots gave it a warm glow. A tiny bar fronted the room, behind which were eight two-tops of natural walnut that could be arranged in different configurations, flanked by six booths along the walls. Everything was dominated by the open kitchen in back, built around a custom Jade range, which was crowned by a massive steel hood. It was the most beautiful restaurant I'd ever stepped foot in. (I admit that up to then the fanciest place I'd eaten in had been an Olive Garden, but I wasn't a complete hick. I had a TV. I had the internet. I had books. I knew about food.)

The chef's counter, which I'd reserved weeks before, was on two adjacent sides of the kitchen—sadly, away from the hot line, but I could still see a lot of the action from my chair. And there in front of me was Bosse Park, or Bo, himself, examining tickets that were coming out of the receipt machine and consulting with his sous chef. I hadn't been sure he would be working service that night, although I had heard he rarely took days off. Like his staff, he was wearing a short-sleeve white shirt, black pants, and a gray apron. No toques or tunics here. He was shorter than I'd expected, but otherwise he looked like his pictures—midthirties, solid-bodied, with a broad, pleasant face and neatly combed, thick hair.

I ordered small plates of the raw diver scallops, steamed egg custard, smoked eel croquets, broiled baby eggplant, and dry-aged duck breast. I was blowing a big chunk of

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my savings on the meal, but I didn't care. I hadn't eaten anything all day so I could devour these dishes.

As I was finishing my last morsels, Bo walked past me, and he nodded subtly. "Excuse me, chef," I said, startling him. He winced, actually. He was, by reputation, quiet and reserved, shy. He didn't usually talk to his diners.

"Yes? How may I help you?" he asked, betraying the slightest trace of a Scandinavian accent. He was, like me, Korean by blood, but he came from another world. His father had been a South Korean diplomat, and Bo had been born in Stockholm, then raised in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Paris, Oslo, and Copenhagen.

"I'd like to work here," I told him.

"As a server?"

"Cook."

"I'm very sorry. There are no positions available."

"I'll do anything. I'll clean toilets to start. For free. I want to stage with you."

"I'm so sorry. There are no openings. Would you care to look at the dessert menu?"

The next day, I waited for him outside the back service entrance. "I'm sorry," he told me again. "We really don't have anything."

Three hours later, his sous chef passed by me at the door. Inside, she told Bo, "Hey, that girl's still there."

He came out once more. "Maybe I can refer you to some other restaurants," he said.

"There are no other restaurants I want to work for, no other chefs," I said. "There's only this restaurant, and you. I've studied everything about you. I won't take no for an answer. I'll stay here all night."

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This wasn't that outlandish of a ploy. I knew he preferred to hire people who were raw and moldable, rather than culinary-school graduates or restaurant veterans, and that he admired persistence. He himself had done exactly the same thing to get his first job at Noma—posing as a customer, then camping out at the back door.

“Have you ever worked in a professional kitchen before?” he asked me.

For an entire week, he had me clean the toilets, and the floors, and the mats, and the prep tables, and the pots and pans. Then he let me clean mushrooms and greens. Then pick apart herbs, juice corn, and seed cumquats. Then chop onions and dice beets. Midsummer, he put me on the payroll.

Twenty-two months I worked at BoYo. As a commis, I unpacked deliveries, labeled and rotated stock, cleaned stations, prepped ingredients, and measured out portions. But my other duties changed from night to night, getting assigned to different chefs de partie, going from the fry station to the sauté to the grill. I was learning so much. Toward the end, I was being allowed to line-cook and plate. I was working twelve, thirteen hours a day, six days a week, beat to shit after every shift, but I loved it—loved being able to take ordinary, plain ingredients and make something beautiful out of them.

Now, I didn't know when or how BoYo would ever reopen. There wasn't space on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant for outdoor dining, and 25 percent occupancy inside was a joke. While other businesses were pivoting to delivery and takeout, Bo had said in an email to his staff that trying to modify the menu to-go wasn't workable. With expenses for ingredients, overhead, taxes, delivery

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fees, and a skeleton crew, we'd have to sell chicken wings for forty dollars to break even.

I was afraid Bo would soon be closing his restaurant permanently, as my parents were closing theirs, along with thousands of other restaurants across the country. I was afraid I'd never work as a commis again.

I got home a week before the final day of service. I didn't know how long I'd have to stay. I was hoping no more than two weeks. But there was a lot to do—vendors to contact, services to cancel, equipment to return or sell, all the financial, tax, permit, and insurance issues to take care of, and then we'd have to break things down and move everything out and do a deep cleaning of the entire place.

For now, I was in the kitchen with my mom and dad, in the weeds. Word about the closure had gotten around, and all of a sudden, for no reason we could figure (it wasn't like we were the only Chinese restaurant in town, and we'd never been the most popular), the phone would not stop ringing with orders.

“Where were all these fuckers when we needed them?” my brother, Victor, said.

Opposed to many Asian businesses that year, the restaurant hadn't been spray-painted with threats or slurs, the windows hadn't been smashed, there hadn't been any rants or boycotts, just some prank calls (“Can I have a side of corona with that?”). But beginning in late January, business had started to drop off, then plummeted with the “kung flu,” “Chinese virus” bullshit, until one day there were just three orders. Things never fully rebounded after that, al-

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