

Never Nevada

Fock 2: Grunts and Gratuities

A week later, after thoroughly enjoying the 1984 Olympic Track & Field Trials in Los Angeles, the Rudes returned to Nevada, but at the southern extreme this time, with Cliff in our company. That particular night was memorable for a few reasons.

It was my 29th birthday, and we were on a serious roll. A week in Los Angeles had our party juices flowing, and Vegas seemed like the perfect booster shot as we launched our van homeward.

We crossed the Mojave as dusk turned to night, and we were awed (no, not odd – well, OK, we were odd too) by the sight of the Las Vegas lights. We may have been on a roll, but we weren't exactly rolling in cash at that point. We were hoping that a little birthday karma might help us out. Sad to report, though, that that would not be the case.

Caesar's Palace, having such a famous name, drew us in. We didn't know if it was the best or what, but it sounded like a great name to drop to our friends at home, so we made it our HQ, left the Moose resting in the parking lot, and made our way inward.

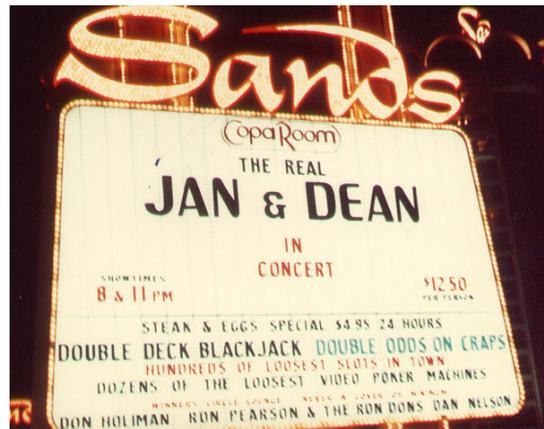
We could have gone to see Jan & Dean in concert at the Sands, but the \$12.50 ticket was a bit steep for our budget. Besides, we were not what you'd call Jan & Dean "enthusiasts."

Caesar's was much more our style, and we strolled around, digging the lights and people and excitement. After a bit, Richie wandered off, and Cliff and I zoomed in on a bar at the edge of the casino. The bartender was mid-20's, skinny (not just thin), with uneasy eyes. We greeted him jovially, as befit our mood, and expected some degree of welcome in return.

"Hey, man," I began, "it's my birthday, we're on a cross country roadtrip, and we're thirsty. How are you doin' tonight?"

His grunt barely hid his inward scowl. "Whaddya want?" he practically snarled. His bar was not busy. In fact, our arrival doubled his business. You would have thought that he'd have the time and the tip-motivation to do his job with a smile. But grumpy is as grumpy does, I shrugged.

Now, I've been a grumpy barkeep at times – anybody at Uno's would tell you that – because it can be really hard to set aside an accumulation of your recent aggravations and woes and greet the next stranger with a smile. But that's what the job requires: the good mood of your customer has to be more important to you than whatever problems are ripping your own life asunder at that moment. It's not easy, and that's why I could only do it in spurts.



When I was at my best, I was a good bartender: affable, talkative, good listener, giving fast service, with concern for your time and food quality, and keeping my bar clean. At my worst, let's just say that my patience was lacking. I got in a couple of tiffs with patrons, but only after getting some shit from them first. If somebody was good natured to me, I would do my best to reciprocate.

There were couple of instances where I was in the weeds and stressing accordingly, and kind of snipped a patron who didn't really deserve it – like the lady who was taking ten forever to decide on what salad dressing to get -- while my printer kept churning out orders, and other customers were clamoring for drinks. I mean, she wasn't being nasty, but her indecision was vexing given the obvious demands on my time. I know I treated a few customers like that a trifle rudely. It was never, "hey, up yours, bitch, you're getting Ranch and you're gonna like it" or anything like that: more like a snap the menu away, and "yup, got it," as I sprinted away from the table. I often tried to make up for it with a "drink on me" or something like that later, if I could. It wasn't even tip-groveling, though it probably seemed like it was.

I usually felt bad about giving bad service because I have a habit of always seeing myself on the other side of things, and I know I don't like that. (That also means, of course, that I don't keep a busy barkeep hovering over my indecisiveness while his world goes to shit around him.)

But after a couple of years of serving the public's whims, it's easy to run low on friendliness. It got so I would cringe when the door opened, or feel my backbone tighten when that printer noise would start. When I resigned my final bartending job, it was a struggle to maintain courtesy to my customers and co-workers. The eleven lowlife construction workers – that is not a slight at construction workers, these guys would have been lowlifes in any profession – who clogged up my bar for five hours on Dollar Draft Night, paying with singles all night, then finally pooling their remaining coins to get one more to split, and then leaving me *nothing* – see, that qualifies as lowlifes, right? – were the last straw. I came very close to exploding on them, but I contained my ire.

I cleaned up the bar, shut down the lights, and left a note for my boss, Sue, ending it with "I am a tap-tilting timebomb, and it is in the world's best interest that I spend my time on the other side of the bar from now on."

Always appreciate your server's good nature.

This Caesar's barkeep, though, took things far beyond any irascibility level that I would ever reach. He didn't even look up from his sink as I gave him our drink order, speaking with enough good cheer that I hoped would be contagious. Often, you can help somebody's spirits if you keep up your own smile, and maybe even offer (or at least feign) sympathy for another's dour mood.

"A Tanqueray and tonic here," I stated, "and a CC and ginger for my friend."

The barkeep turned away without a word.

"Did he hear you?" laughed Cliff. It was a good question because his eyes and face had shown no recognition that we were even there.

Mr. Grumpy returned with our cocktails. They looked small. We continued our merry approach. "Thank you, good sir!"

"Six."

"Excuse me?"

"Six *dollars*," he said shortly.

"Oh, OK, no problem," I replied, reaching for my wallet. I paused momentarily to allow Cliff the opportunity to do the old "Hey, I got this one, birthday boy," but, of course, he didn't. I had no problem with that, though. I had known Cliff since high school, and his penchant for parsimony seemed to go hand-in-glove with his job as an accountant. Chicken or egg, I'm not sure, but it was there.

I took out a twenty and handed to the barkeep, saying pleasantly, "How's your night going so far?"

His deaf act continued. He snatched the bill from my hand and took it to the register. We sat there, somewhat bemused. When he returned and slapped the uncounted pile of bills on the bar near us, I gave it one more effort.

"Thanks, man. So, is that is cool place to work?"

He turned away, again, without a word or look.

I said lowly, more for Cliff's ears than anything, "OK, well, fuck you too, asshole."

He whirled, suddenly fiery. "You want me to call security?!" he practically shouted, "I don't need to take your shit!"

I held my cool for a moment, at least, but my ire rose before my reply was done. "Oh, you're not deaf after all, huh?" Then, with a glare, "Maybe if you don't act like an asshole, you won't get called one!"

Then he leaned threateningly towards the bar. What the scrawny speed-freak thought he was going to do to me, I have no idea. I would have welcomed the chance to adjust his belligerent attitude, though. "You want me to call 'em *right now*??"

"Yes, I do! Call 'em!" I fired back. "Get your goddamn supervisor over here while you're at it. I'd like a word or two with him about *you!*"

Well, it could've gotten uglier, but his fellow barkeep, who had been sitting on his ass at a stool at the far end of the bar, came over and pretty much pulled him away, and Cliff and I both fired him the finger, and set out for friendlier environs, cocktails in hand. And, of course, no tip on the bar.

We did some gambling and such, and continued to booze. We soon discovered that if you stayed at a slot machine or table long enough, a waitress would bring you a drink, without charging! Holy shit, now this was a worthy concept! Fuck Grumpy Boy, we got free sauce!

Part of our time was spent simply watching the activity at the crap table, and trying to figure how to play that damn game. The people there were having a rockin' good time, but we couldn't make hide nor hair out of it, whatever that means. But it made for good spectating, and since it looked like we were actually participating, we got a couple more freebies.

Richie, meanwhile, had found his way to some other casino, had immediately discovered the free booze concept, and assailed it with vigor. He found a swimming pool, and soon was late-night dipping with a couple of lovely ladies from somewhere or other (he didn't recall those details).

We all ended up converging back near the van around three-ish, and set out on foot for Denny's. The place was packed, just as you'd expect at that hour in a party area. We ate, got good service, and left ...without tipping. Trouble was, we honestly didn't realize it until we were all the way back to the Moose. I don't know if we all assumed someone else was going to cover the gratuity or not, but we totally blanked on it. We were so entertained by the clientele that I guess we just grabbed all our change and walked. I felt terrible about it, especially since our harried waitress had done right by us and kept up a pleasant demeanor under obviously trying circumstances.

By the time we stumbled back to the van, we just shoved all our bags and clothes and empties and trash aside, and dropped onto the bed and floor, diving into slumber. The morning urge to discreetly expel last night's fluids became a challenge, though, as the Moose was still sitting smack dab in the middle of a big empty parking lot. That's what woke us anyway; the morning sun was already heating up the metal of the van, and the black asphalt all around it. When it's 95° at 9:30 a.m., you're in for a hot day.

So, the Rude Brothers went to breakfast at – where else? – Denny's. Sure enough, our wee hours waitress was still on duty. We did not get seated at her table, which kind of relieved us. In fact, we were really glad to be waaay on the other side of the room.

If you've never worked in F&B, you may not realize that servers do recognize their customers. The more ordinary you are, the less you will be recognized. But when you dress to the extreme, or order an unusual combination, or do anything bizarre, or leave a big tip, or *leave without tipping*, you go into that mental file of Public To Be Remembered. With our recent transgression, skulking was in order: words of warning travel fast among that ilk.

But, I ended up doing the right thing. When we were done with our breakfast, had gathered our change, and *left an appropriate tip*, I wove through the busy floor and accosted our prior waitress just after she had delivered an order.

"Hi," I said sheepishly (*I went baaaahhh, baaaahhh, and tried to look woolly*). She eyed me with wary familiarity. She looked damn tired. I hoped her shift was almost over. "We were here at about 3:30 this morning..." I continued. She nodded, obviously recalling the stiff. "...and we left without tipping you. I'm really sorry. It wasn't intentional. Here you go." And I handed her ten dollars, which was considerably more than her 15% would have been. In fact, given the 1984 prices -- \$1.69 for a burger, I think – it was probably about 115%.

Her face brightened immediately. "Thank you!" she smiled. I nodded apologetically, and left. As we walked out the door, I looked back, and she was showing the sawbuck to another waitress and smiling. Cliff put on the Ugliest Hat In The World, and we were off to the Big Hole...

RAMtour1990 featured a short stay in Nevada's second biggest city, Reno, which bills itself as The Biggest Little City In The World. If it's trying to be another Las Vegas, it has a way to go yet. Despite glitz and flash aplenty along the downtown streets, there is an overall cheesiness to it that makes you skeptical right from the get-go.

Of course, our opinion was tainted before we even arrived. Kelzo had been living in Reno for a few months with his friend Chuck and Chuck's lady, and he had fed us his negative vibes about the place.



For work, he had been painting houses, some of which were high up on the hills overlooking Lake Tahoe (left). Tremendous views like that don't exactly help productivity. Pretty easy to just look out over that view and have your eyes and mind get lost in it.

But after work, it was back down to Reno, and Kelzo was itching to get the hell out of that city. Bobby and I were his ride back home to Massachusetts, his "escape back to freedom and sanity." [When we got there, he actually stopped the van at the border, and ran out to kiss the Welcome To Massachusetts" sign.]

Bobby and I were on our way home from Seattle, having shoved an inebriated Ed onto a plane back to Boston, after a great week of Goodwill Games action and peripheral socializing. Passing through Reno seemed as good as any other route eastward. Splitting gas expense and dividing driving duty three ways instead of two was a bonus indeed, even if three made for more crowded sleeping in the van.

When we arrived at Chuck's apartment – a decent-looking building, fairly new, not cheap – there was a security guard and a gate. The fence was serious: high, sturdy, and spiked. This was not just some ornamental divider; it was there to keep evil **outside**. So, when you see such a barricade, it is a pretty good tip-off that there is plenty of evil about.

The security guard called up to the apartment. We heard a brief dialogue with two girls (I guess that with be a triologue, huh?). Then we heard them say loudly, "tell them to GO AWAY!!" The guard looked at us, a tad puzzled. We didn't look evil: Bobby wears rounded glasses and a constant grin; I look like me; and Max looked like a respectable chariot.

"Why'd they say that?" he asked us.

"They must have seen me in Seattle!" laughed Bobby. The guard had about as much of clue about that as you do right now. He looked at us dubiously.

"Wrong apartment," I suggested. "Try it again." He did, and it worked.

Once united, we freshened up – it had only been three days since our last shower, not too bad – and headed out to see what Reno had to offer. We only stayed out for an hour or so; Kelzo wanted to hit the rack early so he could flee the city as early as possible in the morning. We had Yosemite, Death Valley, and The Big Hole as our first destinations, and I have to admit to some eagerness on my own part as well.

We went to "The Wall," which was locals' talk for The Little Waldorf Saloon, and had two beers. The whole time we were out, Kelzo and Chuck bad-mouthed Reno. They conceded that it might be a fun place to go for a short visit, but they made it sound like living there was like dwelling among the most devious and malicious hoodlums on Earth: lock this up, lock that down, never leave this unattended, never turn your back on that, avoid that street like the plague, watch your wallet, don't run with scissors, and so on.

Sleeping space in the small apartment was a little bit limited, so when I volunteered to sleep in Max, Chuck and Kelzo both said it a good idea because it would discourage theft or break-ins. "It's in a fenced-in lot," I protested.

Both hosts replied in unison, "Doesn't matter."

So, even after just 12 hours, I was glad to get out of Reno too.