

FINDING MY RELIGION

A family of sinners and saints

BY JENNA MASON



THE FIGHT STARTED WHEN THE guy called me out for flirting with my singer-songwriter ex-boyfriend, who was performing moody ballads from the stage.

I marched out of the downtown Athens dive and booked it to my beat-up Corolla, with its missing muffler and wires dangling out of the dash where a stereo should have been. The guy followed me—you could say he'd been following me for weeks—and before I could crank the engine, he yanked open my driver's side door, put his back against it, and demanded we talk.

"You can't just storm off when someone makes you mad."

I don't remember what I yelled at him or for how long, but when he still didn't

budge, I forced my way past him and cut east up Clayton Street.

"Where're you going—Compadres?" he snorted behind me.

"Yeah. You wanna follow me?"

He knew it was a dare, not an invitation.

He knew a whole kitchen line would be downing shift drinks at the back bar of the Mexican spot where I waited tables. They always had a stool for me. He didn't follow.

I bought a round of Patrón and toasted to a slogan I remembered from an old T-shirt: "You mess with me, you mess with my whole family." Long before I'd even heard of a "restaurant family," restaurants *were* my family.

My father was a sailor. It was tough to

feed a family of five on his Navy salary. He'd always picked up second and third shifts at pizza houses and all-night diners. Every relative I could name had put in years under restaurant roofs. On my fifteenth birthday, I applied to the Chick-fil-A Dwarf House in strip-malled metro Atlanta, where both my big brothers held leadership positions. The oldest, Chris, had given me that T-shirt to remind me he had my back.

The Dwarf House staffed the registers and drive-through with straitlaced, middle-class kids with good grades and impeccable manners, kids who worked a few hours a week to put gas in their cars or pay their pager bills. Behind the spotless counters and the stainless chicken-

sandwich chutes, the kitchen buzzed with the unseen labor of the cooks: an undocumented couple who'd held white-collar jobs back in Mexico and half a dozen just-out-of-high-school misfits who smoked cigarettes by the dumpster and weed in their cars, and dropped a week's wages to see Ozzy's Retirement Sucks tour at the Omni.

Chris played Cool Hand Luke to these nonconformists. Aside from a sarcastic streak and a penchant for Southern rock, I didn't have much in common with him or them. I didn't drink until I was twenty-one, didn't touch cigarettes until my thirties. I devoted time to my youth group and my schoolwork. I waited tables to save for college.

Photos by Lucy Hewett

The kitchen's screw-The-Man attitude intrigued me. They worked their asses off on the line, and they didn't seem to give a damn about much else. A classic little sister with something to prove, I could banter, swear, and snap towels with the best of them.

But I belonged in the front of the house, serving and smiling. I gave a damn about everything. I had everything to lose.

A dozen years, two degrees, and two kids after the Athens bar fight (with the man I eventually married and had just divorced), I signed up for another tour in the service sector. We'd relocated to Oxford, Mississippi, for my now ex-hus-

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band's career; my part-time wages alone wouldn't keep me afloat. I struggled with my mental health and my performance at my full-time job. I went to therapy like my life depended on it. (It probably did.)

My therapist and my family members, even those who'd made careers in restaurants, questioned the prudence of inserting myself into the chaotic, vice-driven environment of the service industry. But I needed a second job to keep my finances in the black. I waded back into the river that had carried me through high school, college, and graduate school. This time, I was a thirty-two-year-old single mother of two with a full-time day job and a much more jaded outlook.

My children spent the second half of every week at their dad's, so I picked up shifts whenever they weren't home. The extra income helped soothe that cruel voice in my head that questioned what kind of parent couldn't scrape together rent. I made friends with people outside of academia, people who didn't already know my ex. Sunday brunch became my saving grace.

If you say "brunch" really slowly, it sounds like the collective groan of every restaurant employee in America. It is the most detested shift of servers and cooks alike. Customers come hurried or hungover but never happy. The former flood in ten minutes after church lets out, having exhausted all their generosity in the collection plate. The latter drift in thirty minutes to close, hammering bottomless mimosas and lingering long after the kitchen shuts down. Short ticket times and low check averages mean everyone works twice as hard for half the money.

Most of my brunch tips went straight to the babysitter who watched my kids while I worked. But that Sunday shift shielded me from the bleakest byproduct of my failed marriage: the loss of a deep-rooted faith that had sustained me in dark times. By the time I changed restaurants and attended church again, I no longer felt comforted by sermons and hymns and handshakes. I had nothing left to lose. Like the restaurant rogues I'd idolized as a wide-eyed teen, I just didn't give a damn anymore.

I realized then why I'd instinctively picked up a serving job for extra cash rather than tutor college kids or teach night classes at the University. I'd retreated again to Compadres to win a fight I'd already lost. I sought refuge among folks I knew would have my back. Now we had everything in common.

Staff meetings, smoke breaks, and shift



drinks made it clear I'd been wrong all along. These people whose lives hadn't followed traditional trajectories—they do give a damn, more than most. They're single parents whose plans, like mine, didn't quite pan out. They're artists, musicians, and writers who grind through shifts to finance their vocations. They're college dropouts who feel unqualified for another career. They're funding an addiction, or they're fighting one. They aren't getting child support, or they're struggling to support intact families.

In the most ungodly of circles, I found church again. And church, it turns out,

isn't just a sanctuary. It isn't just protection.

It's belonging. Knowing and being known. Carrying and being carried. It happens wherever people give enough of a damn to accept others' failings and to admit their own.

We are all messed up in one way or another. But we give a damn, about ourselves and about each other. We celebrate victories together—births, weddings, and promotions. We mourn divorces and deaths along solemn bars. We cover shifts, cover bills, send covered dishes.

And if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us. 🍷

Jenna Mason is the SFA's content and media manager.