

In the Donut Shop

from [The Ballad of Ken and Emily: or, Tales from the Counterculture](#)

Abstract: How often do we become so caught up in our jobs that we fail to see others as people and see them instead only as customers? And what happens when that gold which we strive for turns out to be pyrite? I discovered answers to both questions one bright and chilly evening—in the donut shop.

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My friends think Cleveland is a basketball city and at least three factors make it so. First is the gravitational attraction to the basketball frenzy that emanates from Columbus, in the southern half of Ohio. In the early sixties when we kids were learning the fundamentals of the game, future professional greats Jerry Lucas and John Havlicek were forging national championships for the Ohio State Buckeyes. We read about them every week in the headlines of the sports pages, and my friends still do to this day.

Second is the local presence, since 1970, of the Cleveland Cavaliers. Though seldom champions, they are an exciting team and are always in contention until the end.

And third, many members of the Cavs came to settle in the wealthy east suburban communities of Cleveland, where I grew up and where my friends still live. When I travel into Cleveland in the winter, I visit members of my old high school club and we watch their personal friends on TV.

And so we did one evening in February. We turned the stereo down and the TV up and passed the waterpipe every time their buddy down the street scored. He led all scorers that night. By the end of the game, we could barely talk and I wanted to eat anything with whipped cream on it.

Driving home after the game, I saw a donut shop on my left, two doors down from the neighborhood theatre. The show had just ended and a crowd was forming inside the shop in front of the counter. I parked in the lot and walked inside.

The waitress was racing from customer to customer, having already given up on the method of first-come-first-serve. She was short and stubby, exactly the way I had imagined a waitress in a donut shop to be. Therefore, I concluded that whipped cream on anything would taste as delicious as I had imagined it to be. One particular donut with a whipped cream ring around a jelly-like purple substance challenged my assumption.

When the waitress hurried by, I asked her what kind of donut it was.

“It’s not your turn,” she barked at me without breaking step, and I was silenced in mid-craving.

Feeling more oral than verbal at the time, I chose to rationalize away her anger and thus save my mouth action for chewing. I decided she was probably tense from the pressures of her job.

I waited patiently until she decided to wait on me. When she stopped in front of me, I pointed to the same donut and asked, “What kind of donut is that?”

“Look for yourself,” she demanded.

“I am,” I said. I was irritated but I wanted the donut. “But I don’t know what kind it is.”

“Here.” She pulled out the entire tray and slammed it on the counter. “I don’t have time to answer your questions. I’ve got customers to take care of.”

She walked away and left me looking at a donut I did not recognize even at close range.

Again, I tried to rationalize away her anger, and my anger, but not lost was the fact that I was one of the customers she was supposed to be taking care of and she wasn’t taking care of me. My own anger drowned my humble craving. “Bitch,” I called to her back. My appetite returned.

But so did her anger. She stopped and turned and pointed her finger at me. I noted that it was probably her longest pause since I had come in.

“Get out,” she ordered.

I immediately felt sorry and tried to apologize, not because I had yelled but because I wanted the damn donut.

But she was in no mood to plea bargain. “Are you going to leave or do I have to call the police?”

I stood firm for my donut and called her bluff. “I guess you’ll have to call the cops,” I dared her.

She called the cops.

Five minutes later, Officer O’Riley walked in and surveyed the scene. Then he walked to the end of the counter where she was standing and they conferred. I heard her whisper “the one with the beard.” He walked over to the door and signaled for me to follow. I glanced once more to the donut for inspiration.

Outside in the parking lot, Officer O’Riley said, “Okay, what happened?”

“I said to her could you tell me what kind of donut that is and she wouldn’t tell me because she said it was too crowded to answer questions and so I got mad at her and called her a bitch and she called you,” I said.

He looked at his watch and sighed.

“Look,” he said. “I know she’s kinda ornery. She calls us all the time. She just gets upset when the place gets busy. But we don’t want any trouble. And you know and I know that I’ve got more important things to do than this. So why don’t you just leave?”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I agreed with his initial analysis, showing understanding for both her plight and his. But my sympathies were clearly with the donut.

“Look,” I offered, “why don’t we do this? Why don’t we go in there and you tell her to sell me the donut? And then she’ll sell me the donut and I’ll leave. That’s all I want.”

It all seemed reasonable to me.

But before a decision could be made, a woman who wanted to leave called to Officer O’Riley to move his car. He excused himself, moved the car, and returned. Once more, he stated his position, along with his conclusion. I again offered my rebuttal. Neither of us moved.

About that time, a young boy who had been watching the proceedings opened the door and walked past us. He handed me a bag and I looked inside.

It was the donut.

Officer O’Riley was relieved. “Now will you leave?” he asked.

“I’d be glad to, Officer,” I answered victoriously. But before leaving, I walked back into the donut shop and pointed at the waitress the same way she had pointed at me earlier.

What I wanted to tell her then was that I understood her situation but that I didn’t like being the scapegoat for her frustrations. I wanted to add that I felt sad seeing her so caught up in her job that she could only relate to the people who came in there as objects to clear out and not as human beings. But I didn’t say anything. I settled for eye contact and then left.

Inside my car, I examined my prize, then took a bite. The whipped cream dissolved back to its base of oil and powder and the purple substance was gummy. The donut itself tasted like a feather pillow. I dumped it on the pavement and shook my head.