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On the heels of NOLOSE: a lesson on the intersections of fat, class, commerce, and race

BY GUEST WRITER | OCTOBER 2, 2008

There's a health food take out place a couple doors down from my job. Their tagline is something like, "No fried foods, no mayonnaise, no soda, no butter, no bacon, no white bread."

Sad for them, but I usually just walk on by. Yesterday morning, several of their employees were handing out menus. We actually already have their menu at the office, so I politely declined.

"SE NECESSITA!" called out one of the guys. *You need it.*

I turned around, smirked, and threw my middle finger in the air. I turned away, walked another 10 feet, and stepped into my building.

Thought #1: *I knew this was bound to happen eventually.* In New York, as in many other cities, people get paid by their companies to hand out flyers, menus, and coupons. I once had a man look me up and down, see his face light up, cross the street, and make a beeline to me. He handed me a "lose 35 pounds in 30 days!" flyer. I always cringe when I see someone flyering outside of a gym, because I know they will always give me something. I always refuse, and I always expect them to say something when I do.

Thought #2: *Oh god, I'm going to have to see this guy all the time.* And sure enough, at lunchtime, he rode by me on a bike, on his way to deliver someone's lunch.

I bitched about being harassed to my co-worker, who commiserated about how inappropriate it was of him to say that. Today, on my way to grab a sandwich, I passed by the restaurant again and decided I was going to say something. I thought about the best way to do it, and started thinking about the guy who told me I needed it. I thought about those flyering jobs, how most people are probably rude to him, or simply deny his humanity by ignoring his presence when he's just trying to do his job and give away a menu. Most people probably don't even say no; I see them keep their eyes forward and studiously ignore the person they just don't have time to say no to. I thought about how people paid to flyer are almost always men (and sometimes women) of color, and how they're probably paid very little.

I didn't want him fired.

After getting my sandwich from the deli a block away, I walked back to the restaurant, took a deep breath, and walked in. Nervous about the fact that there

WHERE AM I?



Two Whole Cakes is a blog written by Lesley Kinzel, a mouthy fat broad who deals in body politics, social justice activism, and pop-cultural criticism, usually from a feminist-flavored perspective.

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were other customers around, I pushed past my anxiety and politely asked to speak to a manager. She was a youngish woman of color, and probably gets paid cents more per hour than her co-worker who I was there to complain about.

I told her what happened, and told her that I thought what he said to me was inappropriate. I said it calmly and politely, careful not to be rude or demanding. In this situation, tone was important to me. As an upwardly mobile woman of color, I clearly have class privilege over folks in the service economy, and I didn't want to assert my authority as someone with (more) money by being demanding and reinforcing those hierarchies. Too often, I see folks with relative degrees of privilege react to situations like these by displaying what I consider to be abusive treatment to employees of large corporations who often have little or no control about the policies they seek to change. I've also been on the receiving end of this, having had many jobs in the service industry before I started my salaried career, and I wasn't interested in recreating those experiences for someone else.

The manager immediately apologized and agreed that what he said was not ok. "Can you describe him to me?" she asked. "No, I don't want to get him fired," I replied. "Please just tell all your guys not to say things like that to the people they're trying to give menus to."

I asked her if they had menu quotas and she told me they did not. She asked me again if I wanted to tell her who he was and I declined again. I thanked her for listening to me, and I left, my mouth dry and my heart beating loudly against my chest.

This year, my goal has been to challenge myself to speak up. Speaking out against oppressive comments is easy on the internet because writing is the easiest form of communication for me. In person, I get tongue-tied, nervous, sweaty, inarticulate.

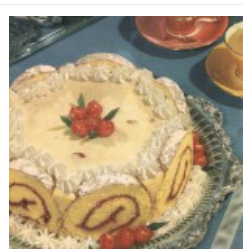
I still worry that the guy might get fired. If everyone gets lectured, it's possible that his co-workers will tell on him. I really struggled between my need to speak up and my acknowledgment of the many sociopolitical factors that probably brought this man to say what he did.

All of this is to say that this shit is complicated, and I don't know that there was one right answer. I hope I did the right thing by myself, by him, by my communities.

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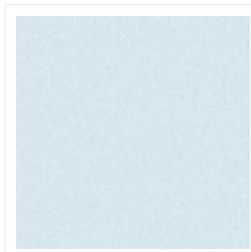
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