

## Eventide

An ex-employee of the Pacific Dining Car (PDC) texted me last Tuesday.

*“Just checking to see if you are aware PDC is auctioning off furniture, etc. Wonder if Wes III feels guilty that this happened on his watch.”*

She sent this message because I am the estranged great grand-daughter, granddaughter, daughter and sister of the owners of the PDC a Los Angeles family business that has existed for 99 years. After reading the text I called my ex-husband, Michael and he found the auction site. We both signed up, logged on and chatted while we scrolled.

“I don’t need 30 shot glasses,” he said. “And I don’t care about crystal tumblers although it’s kind of cool how many pieces there are for sale. Shit, I also don’t need 44 pewter salt and pepper shakers. What do you need?”

I had already speedily trolled through the auction site searching for a specific picture.

“Nothing,” I said. “It’ll make me too sad to have a piece of the restaurant at home. It would be like keeping a rib or a kidney from a dead body in a jar by my bedside.”

“Gross.”

“My point exactly,” I replied.

Until last Tuesday, I could have said that my family is in the restaurant business. A week later while standing in line in another restaurant waiting for a coffee, I realized that all I could say anymore was that my family had been in the restaurant business. Founded in 1921, the PDC had survived the Great Depression, the Great Recession and all the other economic meltdowns in between and since. I had hoped it would survive Covid as well.

You don't own a family business. It owns you. It shapes your in-house relationships. As a family we regularly patronized other restaurants, vetting the competition. We had a wine cellar at home. My siblings and I were taught to smell and taste the difference between blends before we were technically old enough to drink.

My grandfather bought the business from his mother-in-law, who allowed him to work as a bus boy only after he proved to her that he could earn money (i.e., support his wife without assistance) selling encyclopedias door to door. She then refused to let him eat at the restaurant for free until he'd proved his worth to her as a dish washer and could be promoted. The restaurant actually belonged to my great grandfather Fred. When Fred and Lovie retired, they sold the business to my grandparents. It was only after the sale that my grandparents discovered that Fred had been looting the till and had sold them a business in trouble. Like many of their generation, my grandparents just gritted their teeth and soldiered on dedicating themselves to making the business work.

The Pacific Dining Car was an integral part of Los Angeles and its history. Local notables became regular patrons: politicians, the Hollywood elite, sports heroes, and the like, even a few mobsters-- this was Los Angeles in the 20's, 30's, and 40's. I once walked Ken Norton to his table and had trouble speaking. I may have tripped when I pulled a chair out so that he could sit. My mother was introduced to Daryl Gates (before he was all that) as he was being seated at Mayor Bradley's table. I loved reading about the restaurant in James Ellroy's books and seeing it pop up in newspaper articles. I think of my grandfather and how proud he was of his accomplishment and I remember how hard he and my father worked when I think of the restaurant. I remember walking the floor with my grandfather as he stopped to chat with staff to check their work and to see how their families were doing. To my mind, PDC was a long

standing community. Multiple generations of more than one family worked there over the years. And my grandfather and father saw themselves as stewards in charge of their family, the business and of the generations of other families that depended on PDC's continued success.

"A hostess table," Michael said, scrolling up to a picture of a piece of furniture I'd stood behind many times as an adult and hidden behind many times as a kid. "And an over the counter oven. Yes, I think so." He bid on both items.

"You're gonna do the dinner plates at least?" he asked.

"Nope, not even dinner plates."

"Well, I do need plates. I'm gonna make my low bid for three dollars and go up to twenty." The numbers popped up on the screen as he keyed in his choices. "And for the next set of plates I will bid from three up to ten cause there's a fuck ton of them. Maybe with duplicate lots I'll get a better price."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Some of the lots haven't been bid on because they are duplicates," he said.

Michael always knows how I feel. I don't have to explain myself to him. He'd done the exact right thing when I called. I needed to discuss the minutia of selling off leather booster chairs and lamps my father had imported from Spain. I am really sorry the restaurant is dead. I loved it.

When I visited it a year ago, I talked to men still working the floor who remembered me as a kid and remembered when I worked there as a hostess and as an assistant bookkeeper.

During Grandfather's tenure, the Pacific Dining Car was a magical place to me, a happy place of power. My grandparents, my siblings and I ate there every Friday night. And when we

kids were done eating, we were sent into the parking lot where Jimmy, the valet, told us stories and kept us entertained until the adults were finished. I was also allowed to wander into the kitchen or go down into the cutting room or visit the wine cellar where I could watch the men work. The guys were always kind to me and gave me a nickname, which I will not share with you.

Grandfather taught me how to eat a steak, how to handle silverware, and how to sit and act like a grownup at PDC. You cut a good steak in half and eat it from the center out so that if you lose your appetite you've eaten the best part. Ice cream came in a single scoop in a silver chalice and you ate it delicately slivering pieces off the scoop. You didn't dig in. You always sat then immediately put a napkin in your lap at a fine establishment. I learned how to hold a wine glass, how to drink brandy from snifters, how to hold polite conversations. These benefits come with being the owner's grandchild or child.

I remember the smell of the place, the leather backed chairs, steaming coffee in huge urns, and even the meat locker. Every family member who worked in the restaurant was taught how to select, cut and cure meat. You couldn't sell a product if you didn't know from hands-on experience, step by step, how it got from the animal or the farm to the restaurant. Mom and Dad were sent to Europe to learn about wines. Wesley III, my brother, was sent to Texas when it was his turn to learn about meat. The women in my family worked the floor and kept the books. My great-grandmother, my grandmother and my mother served their terms there and my sisters and I all worked for the business, part-time, on and off, over the years. It was the business that took my mother in straight out of college and where she spent years working alongside her in-laws who she liked, and her husband who wasn't always likeable. When my parents divorced, as ugly as

the divorce got, she never entertained the idea of destroying the business. In her mind, it had to survive. It was her children's legacy.

“Dog paintings are the most expensive thing here,” I said. Two oil paintings of dogs dressed in Edwardian garb were going for three thousand dollars a piece. “How did that get to be a thing?”

“They're selling the bull,” Michael said.

“The one outside?” I asked. He meant the restaurant logo that had been perched on a pedestal in the front parking lot for as long as I could remember.

“Motherfucker,” Michael said. “I've already lost one bid.”

“Someone is watching you bid on plates?” I asked.

“No. Your maximum bid is automatically compared to others and someone had already set a higher high bid. Ooh, Miso soup bowls.”

“Silverware?” I asked.

“I still have the stuff you gave me in the divorce,” he said. A cousin had given us several sets of PDC silverware when we'd married. When Michael had moved out. I'd been fair. I'd split everything in half.

My Dad always said that the last thing he ever wanted to do was end up working at the restaurant, with his parents, but destiny drew him in, and in his turn, he kept us going. Grandfather was a savvy businessman and a charming recontour. He liked walking the floor and talking to people. He relished being the man born in a small town in North Carolina who had failed at one business and then succeeded in a notable place like Los Angeles. My dad could also

be a charmer, when it suited, but he didn't enjoy playing the host. My grandfather adored the role.

"Have to drive to L.A. for some of this if I win," Michael said.

"We will make it a trip," I replied. Michael is still one of my favorite people. I'd drive from Las Vegas to L.A. just to spend the day with him.

Like his father, my father was a good businessman, but he was also a bad man and a terrible parent. I suspect that my beloved grandfather, who was a fantastic grandparent, was also a bad parent. But once both men walked through the doors of the restaurant, they could be proud, and I was proud to be part of their family. To be connected to a long standing tradition, to be connected to the city by the history of the PDC was so cool. And it was so cool to see my father and grandfather dressed in dark suits sitting behind their desks upstairs or to watch them walk through the restaurant like, well, they owned the place.

"There is one thing I'd buy if I could find it," I said scrolling up and down the list once more.

"What? What? What? Let me help," Michael said.

"It's a faded print of a meadow with mountains and pine trees in the background and the words "To D- Hot in LA. Gone Fishing. Why the H- Don't You Go Too," painted across it.

"Sounds pretty" he said.

"No, it's old woman wearing too much mascara ugly," I replied, "but in the early days they would shut down in the summers and post that picture so everyone could see it."

"And why do you want to own the ugly picture?"

I had to think about it for a moment. “That picture always hung on the wall somewhere no matter how the restaurant changed or who was in charge.” I rolled through the list again. “But it’s gone.”

Passing the restaurant from generation to generation was always a sticky affair. My great grandparents shafted my grandparents when they sold it to them. When Grandfather died, he left the whole thing to Grandmother and Dad fought her for it. Stubborn people fight until everyone is bruised and face down in the mud. People who grit their teeth and keep a business alive for a hundred years sometimes can’t back off from a fight. We are not an affectionate bunch. We are great story tellers. We can be great company. Some of us are hard workers and compelling public speakers. Some of us are smarter than others. But a family business turns a family’s private life into a business and that makes us a little heartless when it comes to personal matters. He beat her down in the end and she made him pay for the privilege.

My brother was slated to be the next beneficiary of PDC success. My father couldn’t envision his daughters as restaurant owners, and we all accepted that, but I think we all also knew that Wes would be the end of the road for the restaurant even if Covid had not come along. You can train a child to run a business, but he won’t be tough enough to survive if you don’t teach him resiliency. My father was hard on Wes. Whenever Wes failed, Dad would sit back and watch. If he got up again, Dad would applaud his success, but he wouldn’t help Wes **recover or teach him how to avoid** the mistake the next time. So, Wes isn’t a survivor and while I write this, I am sorry to say that this is true. But you can’t just hand a business to your children and say, pick it up. You have to make them feel connected to the tradition of the place and to the people the place represents, and Dad never passed that sense of connectedness onto Wes. No, we have

never been a happy family, but the one thing we could be proud of as a group was the restaurant. When my father failed to prepare my brother for his turn at the helm, he put an end to it.

Michael and I spent another half hour trolling the site and making fun of people who would buy a set of aluminum bread baskets and such and then we called it.

“Well this was entertaining, I’m not gonna lie,” he said. “Thank you for calling me. Call me later if you need to.”

My dad died two summers ago and when I visited him the last time, I got the feeling that the business was already in financial straits. The information came to me in whispered words. I saw the Pacific Dining Car for the last time during Dad’s memorial. The place looked worn to me, like something you were done taking care of. Pieces of furniture looked dated instead of classy. It was too quiet. The staff moved too slowly across the floor. There were too few customers. Something was winding down.

But then, maybe 99 years is enough. I won’t be driving by the location ever again. Too many memories. For me it represents the best of my family as a material expression of us that I hoped would never die even though everything does eventually.