



Booth

Volume 3 | Issue 6

Article 2

6-10-2011

The Mathematics of Waiting

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Recommended Citation

Logan, Kirsty (2011) "The Mathematics of Waiting," *Booth*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 6 , Article 2.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol3/iss6/2>

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The Mathematics of Waiting

Abstract

1. Landscape

At five to nine we take the metal grilles off the window-frames. When we lift, our arm muscles tense to the size of garlic cloves. We already have crumbs in our hair. Clouds reflect on the spilled liquid on the table. A baby throws chewed raisins on the floor. Children thumb grease onto the cake cabinet. The music changes; the CD skips; it's changed back. The roots of our hair grow in the same color as coffee grounds.

Keywords

waitressing, writing, mathematics, tips



ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

June 10, 2011

The Mathematics of Waiting

by Kirsty Logan

1. Landscape

At five to nine we take the metal grilles off the window-frames. When we lift, our arm muscles tense to the size of garlic cloves. We already have crumbs in our hair. Clouds reflect on the spilled liquid on the table. A baby throws chewed raisins on the floor. Children thumb grease onto the cake cabinet. The music changes; the CD skips; it's changed back. The roots of our hair grow in the same color as coffee grounds.

2. Commerce

I waitress to buy the time I need to write. One day of waitressing is equal to two days of writing, because I share rent with my girlfriend and quit smoking and mostly eat rice and vegetables.

Waitressing saves money because I walk to work (+£2.50 on bus fare), get my lunch for free (+£5 on food), get as much coffee as I need to stay awake (+£4 on double macchiatos), and get paid in cash (+£200 p/a tax).

Waitressing turns every purchase into a trade-off: is this thing worth the hours of my life I wasted making lattes? A dress (-5 hours), a DVD (-2 hours), going out with my girlfriend for dinner and drinks and a film (-8 hours). I don't buy much because not much is worth those hours of work. Not much is worth wasting my life.

3. The Mathematics of Tips

being aloof ≠ more tips

being slutty ≠ more tips

being friendly ≠ more tips

wearing blue = more tips

rainy days = more tips

Marvin Gaye on the stereo = more tips

more tips = fewer hours spent waitressing = more hours spent writing = a better writer

hypothesis based on transitive relation: wearing blue = a better writer

4. Monologue

A skinny cappuccino doesn't negate the fat in a cheesecake. I can tell she's been crying. Every day he orders a black coffee, adds three sugars, and then doesn't drink it. I hate when people stub out cigarettes in their cups. Chin up, back straight. Keep your tattoos covered. I hope he doesn't try to bring that dog inside. Put this check on make this coffee put through this bill *yes sir what can I get you* refill the salt shakers get fresh butter *I'll be right with you madam* go downstairs for more pudding plates get ice-cream while you're there *sorry about that, sir, I'll get you another* smile smile I know you're tired I know you ache but it's midnight and it's almost over so just-

5. British Weather

Logan: The Mathematics of Waiting

Some days I am snowblown and shivering, steaming milk even when there are no new checks on so I can wrap my hands around the jug to un-numb my fingertips. Every new customer heralds me with a faceful of frigid air. The windows don't steam up until lunchtime; it takes all morning for the room to be heated by the bodies. My shoulders ache from being constantly hunched and my toes sting from cold. I worry that I will get fewer tips because people will order less: the jumpers make me bulky and no one wants to order cake from a fat waitress.

Other days I am sunbleached and flapping, sweat in the small of my back. I wear a vest even though it shows all my tattoos and I have to hear the question 'what is that on your wrist?' and I have said 'it's a book' so many times that I can't even smile when I say it anymore. My feet slide in my pumps and when we bring ice up from the machine it melts within minutes. I pass plates with my elbows pressed to my sides in case I smell of sweat; waitresses must always be clean and fresh, to match the food we are serving.

6. Dialogue

Things I want to talk to the other waitresses about:

Sex politics

Sentence structure

Feminism

Whether it's better to work on short stories and build a name or just try to write an amazing novel and hope it gets picked up by a big publisher

Suicide Girls

Vincent Van Gogh

Metaphors

Things the other waitresses want to talk to me about:

Screen-printing

The morality of Catholicism

Teaching methods

How to get an Arts grant to design fabric

Greek islands

Open-source software

Spanish politics

Things we actually end up talking about:

Eyebrow-waxing

Mortgage rates

Nail polish colors

T in the Park

Calories

Floor tiles

Indie bands

7. The Mechanics of Writing

Every story I've ever written began on a check pad. I write each story over three evening shifts, lurking behind the coffee machine, serving up G&Ts and meringues with strawberries. Sometimes my imagination will not rise above my burned fingertips and I write about pissed-off girls with shitty jobs, girls who paste on smiles, girls who never get to make their own mess because they're too busy cleaning up after other people. But if the checks are spaced out enough, I can forget where I am and go somewhere else. I

can write about sea monsters and Ancient Roman goddesses and groupies and Japan and fucking behind all-night garages. When I have to lift my pen and measure out two small red wines, three large white wines, a jug of tap water, I'm still halfway across the world or under the sea or two thousand years in the past. Once I'm elsewhere, it's hard to drag myself back.

At the weekend I tape all the check pad sheets together and type them up on my laptop. The taped sheets arch over the kitchen table where I work and when I get up to make tea I tear the tissue paper with the chair legs. It takes a long time for my imagination to rise up beyond my fingertips again.

8. More Mathematics

The credit card machine is slow to spit out receipts. It dials through the phone line and if someone is on the phone then it won't connect, just stutters out millimeters of receipt paper while I stand there and smile at the customers. Even when it does work it is the slowest credit card machine I have ever used: one minute to dial, one minute to check, one minute to print the confirmation.

I add up the hours I have spent standing awkwardly by a napkin-strewn table, staring down at the tiny green screen.

three minutes each time + ten times a shift + three shifts a week + two years = 156 hours / 6.5 days / just under a week.

I could write seven short stories in a week. I have lost seven short stories waiting for the credit card machine.

The next time I am staring down at that little green screen, I resolve to write a paragraph in my head.

9. Observations On My Way To Work

#1. Seventeen slices of white bread, spread across the top of a bin in an arc, frost making its surface glitter brighter than my Christmas decorations. I consider bringing them home, taking my third-hand angels off the tree, and bejeweling my home with these glittering shards; then I remember they will soon melt, leaving me with a damp carpet and a tree covered in

old bread.

#2. A girl with white shoes and shiny hair hunching in a doorway as her boyfriend screams down at her *why couldn't you just leave it alone?*

#3. My girlfriend's ex-girlfriend buying broccoli at the greengrocer; she has puffy eyes and wears black skinny jeans that are two sizes too small. Her cheeks are so round and pink that she looks like she's holding her breath.

#4. A winter sunrise that staggers me so much that I forget how to walk; I stumble off the pavement, my shoes too big and my brain too small because I can't take it all in. The sky is the color of bluebells, of marigolds, of ice-capped hills, of the insides of fruit, of pigs' tails, of hunger and solitude, of joy burning through me from my scalp to my heels. It makes me ten minutes late for work – my boss docks 50p off my tips and I stare at the check pad for the whole shift without writing a single word.

Kirsty Logan lives in Glasgow, Scotland where she writes fiction, edits a literary magazine, teaches creative writing, and reviews books. She is currently working on her first novel, Little Dead Boys, and a short story collection, The Rental Heart and Other Fairytales. Her short fiction has been published in around 80 anthologies and literary magazines, and has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. She has a semicolon tattooed on her toe. Say hello at kirstylogan.com.

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