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Living the (Working-Class, College, Double-Major) Life

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Abstract:

(College, Cracker Barrel, Letters)

Juggling school work, a job, and a social life can be difficult, especially to a young Seminole. With majors in Music and Creative Writing, as well as a job at Cracker Barrel, a young woman describes her sophomore year through letters to her grandmother and best friend. These letters, while describing essentially the same situation, are completely different to both recipients. To her grandmother, the young woman stays positive, slightly sugar-coating any bad situation. There’s a silver lining, one has only to find it. Letters to the best friend can be described as melodramatic, the complete opposite of the letters to Grandma. Things are terrible. I hate my job. I never have time to do anything. Interspersed with profiles of customers, and lists of lessons learned at Cracker Barrel, this thesis gives an interesting and realistic view of what it means to be a working student.
LIVING THE (WORKING-CLASS, COLLEGE, DOUBLE-MAJOR) LIFE
A COLLECTION OF LETTERS, LISTS, AND PERSONAL ESSAYS REGARDING
CRACKER BARREL

By

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Introduction

I never thought that I’d be in the honors program. In fact, I vowed to never be in one again when I first came to FSU. This choice caused my friend and me to get stuck in one of the crappiest dorms on campus, Salley, but I just didn’t want to have the pressure of being an “honors student.” I was one of those students in high school, and I’m not saying that my life was terrible, but it definitely wasn’t stress-free. With homework for seven AP classes plus band, I didn’t know what free time was. I was constantly busy and I wanted to breathe, at least for a couple of years. Somehow, that just didn’t happen. I decided to pick two of the most demanding majors at FSU. Good going, Melissa.

As I entered my junior year, I was bombarded with e-mails about joining the honors program. The advertisements told me that I would have to take only 12 hours of credit, 2 seminars and 2 semesters of thesis hours, altogether.

What the hell, I thought. It really wasn’t more than I could handle. I’d taken seven classes in a single semester. I was sure I could handle a couple of once-a-week seminars and some writing. Not an issue for me.

The honors program correspondent told me that I should immediately start thinking of what I’d write my thesis on. Would it be a research paper or a creative work?

What kind of creative work are we talking about here? I asked.

She mentioned that a creative project could be just about anything, something fictional, non-fictional, or poetic. I knew for sure it wouldn’t be poetic; poetry is not my forte.

I’m not exactly sure why I chose non-fiction. After a bad experience from a non-fiction technique course teacher, which you’ll read about in the letters, it didn’t seem like the smartest choice. But I went ahead with it anyway. Maybe I unconsciously wanted to tell the story of all the college kids out there, struggling to balance school, work, and a healthy sense of free time. And the format? A teacher of mine, Barbara Hamby, suggested letters, so I mixed them with a few essays and lists, and everything just clicked into place.

So here I was my junior year, in the honors program, expected to write a thesis, and unsure of what to write about.

A little voice echoed in my head. Well, more like screamed in my head, “Write what you know.” I can’t count how many times I’ve heard that drilled into my brain throughout the past four years here. And so I decided to write about my job at Cracker Barrel.

Cracker Barrel, oh, Cracker Barrel. It has caused me some grief, and maybe some joy, but also taught me a lot about patience. I never realized how ridiculous some people can be. If you’re
not at their table within seven seconds with a refill, they decide you’re not worth a tip. If something is wrong with their food, they blame you.

But I’ve also met some of the nicest people in the world. Some I work with, and some I serve on a daily basis. They, and the money, make it all worth the hassle.

So I write about my job, as a server, at Cracker Barrel. Because after three years, I assume it’s something I know pretty well.
Reference List/List of Characters:

Ashley-best friend. She lives in Crestview, my hometown. She later works in Destin, which is where Cracker Barrel is located.

Don-my grandma’s husband.

(Ms.) Traci-manager at Cracker Barrel in Destin. Becomes general manager later in the year.

Kassy-server/trainer at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

Caroline and George-regulars that come in everyday.

Paul-manager at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

James-general manager at Cracker Barrel in Destin. Becomes district manager later in the year.

Jamie-manager at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

Sue-older server at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

Dr. Ohlsson-oboe professor at FSU.

Ali and Gabe-roommates.

Nick-friend in oboe studio at FSU.

Kristie-general manager at Cracker Barrel in Tallahassee.

Necole-server at Cracker Barrel in Tallahassee.

Chris-manager at Cracker Barrel in Tallahassee.

Patrick-ETC (trainer) at Cracker Barrel in Tallahassee.

Stuart-regular who comes in everyday.

Ciera-server at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

John-manager who was fired from Cracker Barrel in Destin.

Kathy/Chuck/Jocelyn/Jessalyn-servers at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

Steven-new manager at Cracker Barrel in Destin.

About Crestview: Crestview is a “small” city in the northern Panhandle of Florida. While the city itself doesn’t have any attractions, such as malls, good restaurants, things to do, it does have an extremely high population. Most of the residents of Crestview work in the surrounding cities like Fort Walton Beach (40-50 minutes away), Pensacola (1 hour away), or Destin (45-55 minutes
away). Many of the male spouses of the residents work at Eglin Air force Base, one of the largest Air Force Bases in the world.

About Destin: Destin is a city located on the Gulf of Mexico. Its location makes it the perfect spot for vacationers during all times of the year. Destin contains malls, restaurants of all sorts, movie theaters, surf shops, and most importantly, the beach. Because Destin is in such an ideal location for tourists, it’s expensive to actually live in. Many of the employees at Cracker Barrel don’t actually live in Destin, but in surrounding cities.

Crestview in relation to Tallahassee: about a 2 hour drive west. Crestview is located in between Pensacola and Tallahassee, along I-10.
May 5, 2009

Dear Grandma,

How are you doing? How’s the weather up there? I heard it’s been pretty nice, not as cold as it usually is in May, which is probably really wonderful. Dad says y’all need rain.

How’s Don doing? Should I call him Don? Or Mr. Don? Or Mr. Wolfgang? I’d feel a bit awkward calling him grandpa. But I’m sure he’s upset about the crops not getting enough rain.

So today’s been a good day. I got a job at Cracker Barrel in Destin. It’s my first day looking for a job and I immediately got one. One of the managers, Traci, seemed to really like me and asked me to come back in a few days to meet the general manager. She said I’ll probably start training within the next couple of days. I think she said Wednesday but she talked so fast.

It’s quite a drive away, about an hour, but it’s really straight-forward. You know that road right by I-10? It goes through Eglin territory, right by a blank field that they test bombs out on. The road is always closed whenever they do testing though. Could you imagine airplanes flying over the road with missiles while everyone is driving 100 feet away? Bombs dropping like acorns. And since there are no roads off of 285 until Highway 90 and College Blvd in Niceville, they have to close the whole thing down. But they don’t test very so often.

But yeah, it’s about an hour away. That’ll give me time to relax after work. You remember the Mayan project in 7th grade. I worked for 5 hours on that paper-mache house, trying to make the house smooth and perfectly round. And that roof! Cutting up the pine needles in 2 in. bundles, hot gluing exactly 20 of them together. I think I ended up with 50 bundles of twenty 2 in. pine needles. So much work! By the time it was 11:30 at night, as exhausted as I was, all I could think about as I lay down was hot gluing. So I definitely think an hour after work to relax is a good idea for me.

Traci told me I wouldn’t have to have the uniform for meeting the general manager but to start looking for clothes already. The uniform is pretty old-fashioned; I’m sure Don would appreciate that. No over-alls though. Instead, we wear khaki, black or blue work pants with button-up oxford shirts. Traci told me that they base the color of the oxford shirts on the sugar caddies on the dining room tables; the sugar packet is white, Sweet and Low is pink, the blue is another sugar alternative and the same with the yellow. I think Splenda is yellow. It’s really a great idea to have the shirts that color. And then we wear black non-slip shoes and a brown apron with our names on them. It looks very professional.

I’m really excited to start. I’ll let you know how it goes!
Love you,
Melissa Kay
May 5, 2009

Whad up, Woman?

So I got a job today. Cracker Barrel. Yup, I’m working at old-people central. I’m not even completely sure how this ended up happening. I was going to O’Quigs, right by the Rave, and they told me they weren’t hiring and that they “wanted servers with experience.” Umm, wouldn’t I be getting experience if I started working there??

But I saw Cracker Barrel, just hanging out over by the Chevron gas station and thought ‘what the hell.’ I was already in Destin.

I met up with one of the managers, Traci. God, she was an Amazon. At least 5’10. Not fat, but huge. And she straight up asked me if I wanted to work there. Why else would I have been there?! Then she asked if I had the choice to work at O’Quigleys (since I told her that I went in to apply) or Cracker Barrel, what would I choose? I said something along the lines of “I would definitely choose Cracker Barrel. There seems to be a real sense of community here and a strict focus on customer service. That’s something really important to my morals.” Couldn’t tell her the truth. I’m sure you understand.

Traci said I wouldn’t have an issue getting the job but to come for another interview with the general manager in a couple of days. So I guess I’m working at Cracker Barrel now. The good part is that I get a discount in both the restaurant and that little shop in the front of the store. My mom is always dragging me into the Cracker Barrel in Crestview to get ornaments for Christmas and other little knick knacks, so that’s a plus. Now I’ll have a warehouse full of random bullshit at my disposal.

I saw a couple of waitresses wandering by while I was being interviewed, and I’ve got to say those uniforms are some of the ugliest I’ve ever seen. They were all wearing those Dickies pants, the thick, itchy black and khaki ones, and some type of stiff, cottony short-sleeved button up t-shirt. It didn’t even look like a woman’s shirt. And then on top of that were these super long brown aprons with their names and stars on them. It’s so old-fashioned and unflattering; those women looked like huge-ass cows. Kind of sucks considering that at all those beach restaurants you can wear some cute khaki shorts, dress your hair up with a headband, wear some nice make-up and get a decent tip from the guys. Can’t exactly do that at Cracker Barrel. Guess those servers are freaking amazing. But I guess that’s what you get at an old-people’s restaurant. Why did I decide to work there?
But anyways, what’s up with you? Are you still going to keep working at Sonic? You mentioned that they were going to start paying less, which is really dumb. It’s not like you can really make that much tip at Sonic; it’s not a real restaurant. Are you going to go to Shalimar instead? That’s a long drive, but what am I saying? I’m going to be driving to freaking Destin now. Hopefully I’ll make some killer cash there.

Alright, well, I don’t have a whole lot else to say. I’ll let you know how everything goes.

Ok bye.

Melissa
Hi Grandma,

I just finished my first double this weekend and I’m completely exhausted! Altogether I worked about 20 hours this weekend. That’s almost a full 24-hour day of work! In two days! It was so exhausting.

I got there about 8 a.m. and immediately got thrown into all the chaos. I had to run food (taking the plates of food, which we put on large trays) right when I got there, for about 5 1/2 hours straight. And you don’t put the tray up on your shoulder like in other restaurants, though some people do it anyways. We have to carry the tray on the arm that we don’t write with and then pass the plates out with our writing hand. It makes sense considering that my left hand is uncoordinated. Unfortunately, my left arm isn’t as strong either so my forearm was killing me after only 2 hours.

Finally when it was about 1:30, we started slowing down. Ms. Traci gave me one look and told me to take a break and go sit in the break room for a bit, get some lunch, and then come back on the floor around 3. She promised that I’d get some tables for the night shift since they aren’t as busy at night. Then she told me to close the cooler door I was fanning myself with.

I have to say that yes, the food is bad for you, but it is so good! I got fried chicken tenders with some corn and fried apples. Oh man, the fried apples. It’s cinnamon goodness in a too-small bowl. The cooks make them right in the building. That’s what I like about Cracker Barrel; all of their food is home-made. They make the batter for the steaks and tenders and then cook them to order. And all the sides, too. REAL mashed potatoes, with bits of skin sometimes left in them. That’s when you know they’re good, when the potato-peeling machine can’t even get off all the skin on the potato.

So I took my break and was good to go by 3. I was placed in the middle dining room (it has a fireplace in it) with about 4 other servers. Ms. Traci said she wanted to make sure that I had plenty of help from the night servers considering that though it isn’t likely, we sometimes do get a dinner rush. When that happens, things can get pretty hectic.

And sure enough we did get a dinner rush and I was freaking out. I only had 2 4-tops (2 tables that have 4 chairs per table. We also have 2-tops and a round table which can serve up to 8 people), but I was so busy! Between making sure that the drinks were always full, and running
the food in the window, and making sure there was enough unsweet and sweet tea (since we make both for whatever reason) made, making sure there’s enough ice in the bins, making sure the middle delfield (a table-cooler that sits in front of the window and it carries all our cold sides like coleslaw and apple sauce, along with butter, sour cream, chow chow, onions, etc) is stocked, I was overwhelmed. I had to ask my old trainer, Kassy, to help me out. She told me to quit worrying so much about all the stuff inside and to worry about my guests more than anything else.

“The guests come first.” She said to just take care of my guests and run food that was in the window. Nothing else. After I started doing only those two things, life got a lot easier. Kassy told me that once I get the hang of things, it’ll start getting easier and I’ll be able to multitask like everyone else.

But Kassy. She’s pretty cool, Grandma. She’s super Southern, as in thick Southern accent from Georgia. She was my trainer for the first 3 days I was training. She gave me a packet of orders that I had to put into the computer. She called it the Micros; I don’t know why; maybe that’s the computer program that allows us to input the orders. But anyways, so I stood (not sat, nobody sits on duty) for about 2 hours putting orders in for practice. Sometimes they’d just be breakfasts, and then sometimes they’d be really specific like “egg whites only” and then I’d have to find the button that corresponded with the phrase. It wasn’t really that hard, but time consuming. There’s just so many buttons! But luckily the micros is ordered after the menu so once you know the menu inside and out, then you’ll master the micros.

She’s pretty young, too. I think she said she was 28. I have to say though, I sure hope I’m not here until I’m 28. She told me some pretty helpful hints, like if the customer doesn’t specify how many chicken tenders she wants (because we have 2 sizes) to just assume it’s the larger size and ask for her 3 sides (as opposed to 2). Sounds like a scam but I guess if you’re going to be too lazy to read the menu then you deserve it.

On my first day that I was serving with her, one of the customers wanted to tip both of us. The woman said that I did such a fine job that she wouldn’t feel right only giving a tip to Kassy. Of course she got all of the tip since she was training me, but I thought it was really nice of her. Made me feel really good that I was doing something right.

I think I’m going to have to cut it off here for now. I’m writing this after work and all I want to do is sleep! Luckily I have the next 2 days off so I’ll have time to pass out.

Love ya!

Melissa
Fruit Plate

When I started working at Cracker Barrel, I quickly came to know some of the regulars, including Caroline and George.

What I liked about Caroline and George was that they weren’t like many of the other regulars that came in; they had a bit more class. They were an older couple, probably about 70, George being one of those standard old men who wore dress pants on all occasions with some type of button up dress shirt or polo. Caroline, on the other hand, was a bit more eccentric. She’d come in wearing a completely white outfit with a ton of this gaudy gold, costume jewelry, long strands of it, big brooches, and tons of rings full of emeralds and rubies. She had a lot of money, and this was her way of flaunting it.

They used to come in every other day and sit in one of the back corners of the second dining room, right near the window. If they couldn’t get one of those tables, they’d sit in the back corner of the first dining room. And if they couldn’t get one of those three tables, they’d wait until one became available. The hostess on duty would casually go up to the server in the second dining room, and let them know that George and Caroline were here. Just the name would set the server in a frenzy; they’d take the dirty plates from the table right away and almost shoo away the guests who were at George and Caroline’s table. Then a quick cleaning, some picky straightening of the sugar caddy, salt and pepper shakers, dusting off the chairs, and George and Caroline would be ushered to their table.

No matter how long, or usually how little, they had to wait, they always greeted us servers with gracious smiles. They’d wave to all the servers in the dining room and even usher some of us over. Every one of us (the ones that had been there for at least a few months and were familiar with Caroline and George’s ritual) would rush over to their table, ask how they were doing, and give them a tidbit of information about our life. Jackie had to buy new tires for her car today and she needed to make some extra cash, Zoe mentioned hiding a bad haircut with a headband, and Brad was thinking about how his kids had to stay at home an extra hour with a sitter. George would nod in agreement while Caroline would usually grab hold of your forearm, her emerald rings clinking on your wrist. She’d tell you that everything would work out and you’d feel immediately better knowing that Caroline thought you’d be okay. Whenever you would ask about George and Caroline’s personal life, Caroline would mention something she recently purchased, a new sweater or a necklace. George would simply nod. They never mentioned the surgery George would be having the next week, and that the tumor in his throat didn’t shrink with the last batch of chemo, or the fact that Caroline was forgetting small things, becoming more and more child-like each day. No, they smiled and told us everything would work out.

Once this ritual was completed, each server would wander back to the task they had abandoned, whether it was sweeping up their section, or attending to a new customer who just sat. The server
would return to the table and drinks would be ordered. George usually ordered a Coke, coffee, or water with lemon, while Caroline always ordered water with lemon.

While Caroline and George are some of the nicest people around, they’re also some of the pickiest, mainly Caroline. If she wants a pot of fresh coffee, you make it. If she wants 20 lemons in her water, you get them. If her pork chop is too dry, you bring it back and demand that the cooks learn to make a decent chop.

I had the pleasure of dealing with Caroline during one of her picky fits.

“I want a fruit plate,” she told me.

Now while Cracker Barrel does have a vegetable plate, which includes four vegetables of the customer’s choice, we don’t normally carry fruits besides bananas, lemons and orange slices.

“Oh, Ms. Caroline, we don’t have a fruit plate,” I told her gently. “We have a vegetable plate. You could get the cinnamon apples as a side. They’re really good.”

“I want a fruit plate.” She folded her arms and stared at her husband.

“Darling, they don’t have fruit here. Why don’t you get a pork chop, or a salad? You like them.”

But Caroline wouldn’t budge. She wanted a fruit plate and I had to find a way to make one.

I went to the kitchen and immediately asked around what I could do for Caroline.

“Why don’t you use a banana and some orange slices?” Ms. Julia asked me. “And then ring it up as a vegetable plate.

“Yeah, and then you could use some strawberries from the strawberry shortcake,” Mat, the prep cook said.

“Those aren’t really strawberries though,” I said. It was more of a syrupy concoction of strawberries, similar to maraschino cherries.

Mat shrugged.

“Well,” Ms Julia said, “that could work. And then some fried apples. Put some lemons on just for show.”

I knew that this would be the best we could do so I went ahead and let Donald know that the vegetable plate labeled with four sides of fried apples was just one side, with bananas, strawberries and orange slices.

When my food appeared in the window, it looked as if we actually sold fruit plates.

“Hot damn, Donald! That shit looks for real!” I said.
Donald cocked his head back and said, “Yeah, of course it does. I made it.”

When I brought it out to Caroline, she was ecstatic. She clapped her hands together like she had just seen a kitten pee in the litter box for the first time.

George grabbed my hand and gave it a hearty squeeze.

“Tell Donald that he did a wonderful job,” Caroline said, chewing on an orange slice.

“I certainly will.”

While eating a plate of fruit would take most customers a total of 20 minutes, George and Caroline sat for an hour and a half, constantly looking around the dining room for a morning server they knew. By this time however, about 4 p.m., most of the morning servers had already left, leaving only the first shift of night servers, myself included. They waved me over, talked to me about school, asked for a cup of coffee with lots of creamer, asked if I had plans for my weekend (Mondays and Tuesdays), anything to keep me coming back. This only lasted for maybe 15 minutes before they realized I was at work and that I had other people to attend to. They left slowly, Caroline hugging as many servers as she could before they left the dining room, as if she were leaving Destin forever. A quick kiss on the cheek and they promised to be back later on in the week. A $5 bill lay on the table along with a ‘thank you’ note written on a napkin.

Anything for Caroline and George.
May 17, 2009

Ashley,

So I’ve been working at CB for about 2 weeks now and it’s pretty freaking crazy. I worked my first double about a week ago and I totally understand what you mean about dying afterwards. I was so completely exhausted that I actually started tearing up while I was doing my side work. That’s how tired I was. One of the managers, Paul, had to get another server to help me out since he saw how stressed I was. He’s actually the one who gave me the job. I was supposed to meet up with the general manager after I met Traci but unfortunately he wasn’t available. So I got Paul. He’s actually a pretty cool dude (he laughs like you’d imagine Santa would laugh), but he looks like a huge brown bear, about 6’5 and over 300 pounds. With a fat bulging-baby neck and coal-black hair. And the things he wears. My God. I wish I could help him out; he obviously has no idea what he’s doing. He must buy all his work shirts at Target. They’re that type of thin, itchy cotton/polyester blend, thick vertical blue stripes running down a lighter shade of blue, with navy blue Dickies that have a hole near the back pocket. A hole! I guess he doesn’t buy another pair because he’s thinking that they’re just going to get more holes in them, which is true. But still. And somehow the shirts are always stained with some sort of white powder. Maybe it’s from working on the grill when the cooks get busy, but even when we aren’t busy and he hasn’t been breading chicken tenders and mixing pancake batter, he’s always got that streak of white powder somewhere along his body. It’s bizarre.

Ms. Traci’s a fucking mammoth woman also, so I can’t imagine where she shops. You know how hard it is for me to find pants that fit. Imagine me being about 3 inches taller and with huge shoulders. That’s Traci. Big woman. And so is my general manger. I’d say they discriminate against small people but my other manager, Jamie, is like 5’5. But Traci. I don’t know, she’s not an unattractive woman, but she dresses, well, kind of like someone who doesn’t know how to dress like a professional. You know what I mean? There are those people can dress for business meetings and special occasions and look completely normal, and then when you see them outside of a work situation and they’re wearing normal clothes, it’s just weird. Like seeing a teacher at Wal-Mart. Well, Traci is the opposite. She’s constantly pulling her shirt down, thinking somehow that it will extend the material, and smoothing it. Obviously she’s uncomfortable in her own clothes. And all of it’s kind of the same. Black dress pants, and some type of fake silk-esque short sleeve blouse, buttoned-up, maybe some red swirls or blue daisies. It all matches; I suppose that’s what she’s going for. Makes sense. But the shoes. Ah! We’re supposed to wear non-slip black tennis shoes, but obviously Traci isn’t going to wear them as a manager. No, she wears black, box-toed loafers that kids are always forced to wear to church. They’ve obviously seen their fair share of CB considering that sometimes when Traci walks, the heel will come slightly detached from the shoe. God. I’d rather wear my hideous non-slip sneakers over her shoes any day.
James, he just dresses like a normal-ass manager. Black pants, a long-sleeved shirt, usually white or light blue, with a solid-colored tie. Standard stuff, but he looks like a manager. And one that takes pride in not only his job, but appearance as well.

Jamie, he’s the youngest manager at CB. I’d say he’s probably 30 or something, and he dresses like it. Jamie’s the most ambitious when it comes to his clothes; he wears black slacks, and a rose, long-sleeved silk shirt, with a pink and purple colored tie. I told him one day that we matched, since I was wearing my black Dickies and my pink oxford. It was hilarious. He was like “Oh my gosh girl, we’re twins!” But all of the younger women flirt with him and he flirts back. There are some lewd comments and jokes made at work pretty often whenever something concerns Jamie and one of the women. I’d repeat some of them but I honestly can’t remember them exactly…they’re pretty creative and people at work seem to have a strange knack for them.

But what else? My trainer is pretty cool I guess. She’s like 28 and still working at CB though so I don’t know how cool you can be considering. Kassy, that’s her name. She’s super, super Southern…like worse than Kyle and those guys from Baker. Well, maybe not worse, probably about the same. Thick accent, from southern Georgia, hunts, fishes, wears camo for fun. That kind of thing. She’s nice though and not a bone-head. She gave me a bunch of hints and secrets to help me get my work done faster and places where I can skip corners, like the silverware for example. We have to roll one pan of silverware for every shift we work, which is 5 rows of 15 (That’s 75. I know you can’t do math : p). It was taking me almost three times as long to do my silverware as the other servers (of course I’m new so I still have to get used to it), but still, I was there so much longer than everyone else. Kassy told me to put my silverware in a different way.

“Yeah, but I can’t get the 15 in a straight row if I don’t lay them this way,” I told her.

“That’s the point.”

Damn, I felt like a freaking idiot. No one actually does 75 except for me! Well, I tried Kassy’s method and the first day Paul made me weigh my silverware. He’s kind of a silverware Nazi. He’ll make everyone weigh their silverware if he suspects people are copping out. And that’s exactly what happened with me. He gave me this look like “That shit doesn’t work with me,” his lips pulled back real thin, to the left side of his face as he handed it back to me and told me to roll another row. I haven’t tried to do it since.

Kassy told me later on that I have to work up a reputation with Paul. Do the right amount for a week and a half or so, weigh it to show him that I rolled my share (or at least offer to weigh it so he knows I’m not scared of coming up short), and then he wouldn’t even blink an eye next time you gave him silverware. I don’t know. Sounds kind of risky to me, but she’s been working here for quite a while so I’m sure she knows what she’s talking about.
But anyways, that’s really about it. I’m working 40 hours a week, 5 days a week. I work every weekend and then get Mondays and Tuesdays off. It’s nice considering that after the weekends I’m pretty tired. Makeshift weekend I suppose.

It’s good to hear that you quit that stupid job of yours. If that company isn’t going to pay its employees, then fuck them! And I’m sure you’ve got enough money saved up to last you until you get another job. I really don’t blame you for wanting to take a break. Now you can actually go visit your grandparents in Virginia. I’m sure they’ll really like that.

Alrighty, I’ll let you go.

Byeeeeee

Melissa
Hi Grandma!

I’m sorry for not writing sooner. Work has gotten so crazy. I practically work 40 hours a week, Saturday-Wednesday, and when I do have a day off I sleep for 12 hours. I don’t feel like moving at all, kind of like when Grandpa would get in his fuzzy green recliner and just lay there for hours, doing his crossword puzzles with the baseball game on as background noise. I guess I get that from him. He’d probably smile knowing that.

School starts in a couple of weeks and I’ve already let my managers know. My general manager, Ms. Traci, asked if I was going to transfer to the Tallahassee store. I think I’m going to have to do that. Coming back once a month to work in Destin just to keep my job sounds like a huge hassle. I’d have to pay for at least a tank of gas to get to and from Tallahassee, plus the Midbay Bridge toll, which costs $2 each way. And you just never know what the day is going to be like. The servers have already started complaining about the fact that summer is coming to an end. Sue, one of the older servers that’s been working there for years, pretty much grunts and complains about the tips she’s getting now that most people are heading back home. She says that “snow birds” are the worst tippers in the world. They’re rich and can afford a condo on the beach for the winter and a flat in Manhattan for the summer, but they clench their money like a clam protecting its pearl. She told me that it’s a good thing I’ll be transferring to a store that’s on the interstate.

I’m pretty excited about going back to school though. It’ll be my first semester in the music program and I know I’ll be busy. I’m a year behind so my lessons with Dr. Ohlsson (my oboe professor—we have lessons with him once a week) will definitely be intense. He told me that what’ll happen is that I’ll have a few technique books, scales, a few etudes (practice pieces—not for performing), and a solo for the end of the semester. I’ll have to make my own reeds and I’ll have to practice for a minimum of 2 hours every day. 2 hours Grandma! And I’ll be taking music theory and band. And I’ve got an English class. I’m going to be so busy! My English advisor told me that being a Music major and a Creative Writing major would be the death of me, but I’m going to do it. I can definitely do this. If I can take 7 AP classes in a single high school year, be in marching and symphonic band, participate in Solo and Ensemble, be President of the Juniorettes Women’s Club, and be treasurer of the National Honor Society, I can do anything. I told her that, but she just stared at me with a blank expression, pulled out a purple pen, and wrote down the course numbers for the classes I’d need on a torn sheet of computer paper.

Then I have work on top of that. I’ll probably work Friday-Sunday. I can’t imagine working during the week with so much on my plate. I’ll just have to go talk to the manager when I get into Tallahassee.
Did I mention that I was rooming with my suitemate, Ali? We have a two bedroom apartment close to campus since I’m still not sure if I’ll be getting a car before school starts. I think I’ll be able to afford it after a couple more weeks of work, but who knows for sure. I’ll just have to see when Dad comes down to help me move stuff into my new place. It’ll definitely be nice not living on campus; those dorm rooms are really dreadful with white cinderblock walls that you can’t nail, tape, or glue anything on, one small 5-drawer dresser for 2 people. A bed that has to be raised 3 feet so that you can actually fit some cheap plastic drawers beneath your bed for canned food and cereal, a miniature fridge for two 18 year olds, and a disgusting gray bathroom with a shower drain constantly clogged from the hair of those who lived in the room years before us. Yes, this’ll be a wonderful change.

I think Mom’s a little sad about me leaving though. She’s got the kids, but at night she’s alone and I know that’s probably pretty tough on her. Who likes making dinner for one? How do you even make a dinner for one? How do you fold king size sheets by yourself? I talk to her every day, but still. Maybe you could give her a call, remind her that I’ll be home for the holidays.

But that’s about it for now. I’ll try not to let two months pass before I write you again.

Love you, Grandma!

Melissa Kay
What I’ve Learned from Cracker Barrel over the Summer

1. Paul is known as Pauly, Paul Wall, Paul Weezy, Weezy, Pauly Pocket etc.
2. If you’re feeling particularly lethargic, wear your one-star apron.
3. You can never sweep the floor enough.
4. Kassy snorts when she laughs really hard.
5. The AC does not work. Ever. Even when they say it’s fixed.
6. Scooping the ice with a glass is a bad idea. Just ask Lacey.
7. Julia is the nicest person ever.
8. Watch out for the grits and gravy. They will give you 3rd degree burns.
9. If you are nice to Erasto, he will give you silverware.
10. If you are nice to the managers, nothing happens.
11. Keep an extra towel in your pocket when you have salad delfield as your side work.
12. Jamie is the coolest manager. (Sorry other managers!)
13. If you are waiting for Kara as your relief, it sucks for you.
14. Don’t ask Kathy to check your side work because she actually checks it.
15. Jamie is the coolest person to close with. (Sorry other managers!)
16. Always, always have a coffee topper on top of the pots. (Sorry Kassy!)
17. Only 2 pans of biscuits will fit in the drawers.
18. Aaron is super. Aka superserve.
19. The night toaster will either burn your bread or not toast it at all.
20. Tabasco in the eye does not feel good.
Note: About the middle of August school started back up. I was anxious about this year because it was my first semester in the music program, which I had heard was extremely demanding. I also started living in my own apartment instead of the dorms, and working in a new (quite old, actually) Cracker Barrel.

August 31, 2009

Ashley,

So I worked my first weekend at the Tallahassee CB this past weekend. It was definitely interesting. The store is set up completely different than the one in Destin, but then again the Tallahassee store is like 50 years old. And it shows. The store itself is about half the size of the store at home, and it’s set up backwards—the cash registers are immediately on the right instead of the left. It’s obnoxious. When I tried to cash out, I was shoved completely against the counter because of the hundreds of people on the wait list hanging out in the store. By the way, I was told that the Tallahassee CB is almost always on a wait. I don’t know if that’s a good sign or not.

The front dining room is about the same size as in Destin but the middle dining room, God, it’s humongous. There are four-tops lining the left wall of the dining room, 6 of them, and the right side of the dining room is lined with a four-top followed by 5 two-tops. I guess there are only a few more tables than in Destin, but it just feels so much bigger. There’s so much more space to walk between the tables, especially without the two-tops directly in the middle of the four-tops. Now I don’t have the issue of dropping trays of eggs on anyone’s head. Just kidding. I’ve never dropped a tray on anyone. Could you imagine how embarrassing that would be?

The back dining room, or “sunroom” as everyone in the store calls it, is a complete joke. It’s a row of 4 four-tops lining the window and then a row, just big enough for a single body to squeeze between, of two-tops. If you combine the tables for a party, you can’t move back there at all. I had to do some serious footwork in order to avoid dropping a tray of poached eggs on a man’s head. (Now I’m talking about dropping eggs again!) That’s how ridiculous it is. And I got stuck in that room for the weekend, with 2 tables, a four-top and a two-top. I mean, are you fucking kidding me? How’s that a section? And there were 4 other people in that dining room with me. FOUR OTHER PEOPLE. I guess they just stick all the transfers or rising stars back there because the managers think we can’t do our jobs.

It—I don’t know—kind of sucked. There were so many people on the floor, I think 24 in total, and everyone was constantly doing something. Whenever I’d go to fill ice, the ice bins would be completely filled. There was always a back-up of tea made. Whenever a server assistant would yell for biscuits, there would be three people fighting to get the biscuits. It was a nice change to have everything stocked for once. Everything is run so efficiently, but I think it’s because of the general manager. She’s quite terrifying. Things were relaxed when I came in. People were talking about what they did the night before, others were drinking tea, some were just kind of standing around doing nothing, and some were running food. It was just pleasant. The second
Kristie’s 5’2” body walked in, man. I literally saw three servers dump the coffee they were drinking and immediately started filling the ice bins. A couple that was talking by the tea urns started wiping down the counters and asking another person to grab some kid cup lids from the back. Some other servers practically sprinted out of the server alley with water pitchers and coffee pots to fill up drinks in the dining room. I was thinking maybe it was an overreaction, but when Kristie opened her mouth and told us to quit standing around, I understood.

“I know there’s food that needs to be ran! And you! By the ice machine, why don’t you fill the ice bins? I don’t pay you for nothing.”

Her voice had the texture of a life-long smoker grunt mixed with gravel scraping against concrete. And it was loud and piercing. The clinking of glasses, the shoveling of plates in the window, the banging of coffee pots couldn’t drown out the sound emitting from her tiny body. It was terrifying.

I went to introduce myself hoping that it would demonstrate some good will. She looked at my face once, turned to her office and yelled over her shoulder, “Hope you’re used to being busy.”

Other than that, the weekend went by pretty well. Not that many servers really said anything to me. In fact, they barely looked at me. It was as if I wasn’t even worth getting to know. One of the few servers that actually bothered to talk to me, Necole, said that they have so many transfers each semester that most of the Tallahassee servers don’t even “burden” themselves to learn their names. How rude. How do you work with someone and not even try to learn their name? Sounds like an awkward situation to me.

I hope next weekend is better. I’ll have a better guess at how busy I’ll be with school by then, too. We shall see.

Melissa
Hey Grandma,

    Thanks for giving Mom a call this past weekend. She said it really made her feel a lot better about me leaving. It’s definitely a good idea for her to get a new hobby or to read more. I think then she won’t have so much time on her hands to be worried or sad.

    I just started school a couple of weeks ago and it’s already hectic. I never imagined that the music program would be so demanding! I literally have 8 classes, which is an insane amount. Most people usually take a max of 5, but because the music classes don’t count for as many credits as other classes I have to take more. It’s quite stressful. I have music theory, sight-singing, band, oboe lessons, another music class, a literature class, and a writing class. I’m trying to figure out when exactly to do everything, since music theory has homework every day, and my literature class has about 50-70 pages of reading for every class, and my writing class also has some reading as well as papers every 2-3 weeks. I’m also required to practice about 3 hours every day and make reeds. I know you probably don’t know exactly what everything means, but the point is that I’m busy! I’m sure I can handle it but, whew, it’s a lot!

    My living situation didn’t quite turn out the way I expected either. Ali has a boyfriend from back home, and I guess he got kicked out of his house or something and has nowhere to live, so now he’s living with us. I’ve met him before and he’s really cool, very calm, clean, and respectful, so I’m not really that worried about us not getting along or anything. It’s unfortunate that it won’t be just Ali and me. I was looking forward to it just being us and having girl nights, and cooking together, and movies. Now there’s a boy. My mom wasn’t exactly the happiest person when I mentioned it to her, but I think this can work out for all of us. We split the rent and utilities 3 ways which is a huge money saver. It’ll just take some getting used to.

    Speaking of getting used to things, the Cracker Barrel in Tallahassee is definitely a challenge. I’ve worked a couple of shifts already and it’s completely different from my home store. The server alley is always clean (things like cups and glasses are always stocked), and the food comes out so fast. And correctly! But there’s a lot more pressure to get things done quickly and correctly. Don’t get me wrong, it’s wonderful having managers demand such high standards out of the servers, but I don’t know if they really trust us. We only have 2 or 3 tables at a time and they always have so many people on the floor. One night, there were 8 people on the floor at 9 p.m. It was hardly necessary to keep us all on, but for some reason they didn’t cut anyone. Maybe they’re afraid it’ll get busy. I don’t know, but with so many servers all the time, I barely make enough money to pay for my bills. I can’t afford to take on more shifts without my grades suffering.

    Hopefully my general manager, Kristie, will see that I’m a good worker and can handle more. She’s quite strict about everything that happens in that store; she runs a well-oiled machine, if you know what I mean. If you mess up, expect to be sent to the office. Unfortunately,
I’ve experienced this already. I forgot to add a side of sausage to this man’s order and gave him the wrong toast. When my customer told me of my mistake, I was slightly taken aback. I never had a problem remembering a customer’s order in Destin. But I apologized and told him I would immediately get his sausage and his sourdough wheat toast. He seemed satisfied with my apology as I proceeded to the server alley. Right when I stepped through, Kristie pulled me aside and asked me what the problem was. Kristie is quite intimidating, too. She’s small and stout, but she doesn’t let that hold her back.

“I accidentally forgot to put in an order of sausage for my customer and gave him the wrong toast. I apologized and I’m fixing it right now.”

“Why did you forget?” She folded her arms.

I shook my head. “I guess I just forgot to write it in my book.” I’m not sure what she wanted me to say.

She gave me a stern look and told me to pay more attention, then headed for the third dining room to talk to my customer. When I returned with the man’s sausage and toast, he grumbled his thanks to me. He didn’t leave me a tip. I wonder if he would have left me something had Kristie not said anything to him.

The servers there, well, they aren’t really that friendly either. Most of them don’t say anything to me, and if they do, they ask if I’m new and where I’m from. That’s about it. Maybe once they see me more around the store they’ll realize I’m here to stay.

Yeah, so that’s my life right now! Just trying to get back into the swing of things with school, and finding time for homework and practicing and lessons. I’m sure it’ll get easier once I have a schedule in place.

Until then, I love you!

Melissa Kay
Note: This letter is addressed to Ashley. School never seemed to get any easier, and I was having a difficult time adjusting to the Tallahassee Cracker Barrel. I missed the people I had become used to working with, I missed my mom, and I missed my friends. Ali, unfortunately for me, had Gabe, and we didn’t hang out alone like we had the previous year. I was incredibly lonely during this time.

October 2, 2009

Hey,

I don’t think I can imagine a place more miserable than this Cracker Barrel. Honestly, everyone just seems to be so unhappy all the time. Like, I get that people have school and work and a social life to balance (for those that are my age and appear to be in college) but damn, everyone is constantly scowling and bitching. The first weekend must have been an exception, you know, when I mentioned that people were talking and having a good time. Maybe it’s because everyone was just then getting back to school after summer vacation? I don’t know.

What really sucks about it is that no one really knows who I am, still. I’ve been working there for a month and none of the servers know my name, neither do the cooks, unless they’re looking specifically at my tickets, and neither do any of the managers. Not even fucking Kristie! The damn person that hired me. She says something like “hey…,” kind of pauses until I turn around (I see her eyes shift down for a split second to my apron), and then she says “Melissa.” One day I decided to ignore her and see if she would actually try to remember my name or just come up to me and say something. Instead, she just gave up and walked away to yell at somebody for standing around. I think she yelled “hey, you by the window” instead of saying their name, too. She doesn’t give a shit about us as individuals. I’ve never had a normal-ass conversation. I used to talk to my old manager, James, about school all the time. Or if I had plans that night, or whatever. It’s all about running the machine, here. Making sure it has the fuel and maintenance it needs without regard to the poor souls running around operating it. I feel like I’m living during the Industrial Revolution. God.

And some of the managers, man, they’re terrible. One guy, Chris, is either a) never found when things get hectic, or b) is constantly being a dick by telling people to do random shit. He told me once, on a Saturday morning, to wipe down the counters before I took out drinks to my table. I asked if I could bring my drinks first and he told me….I quote “Do what I say.” What am I, his child? Who the hell talks like that to a grown-ass person? I looked around at a girl who was standing behind me by the ice machines, pretending to do something, and looked at him again, thinking he’d make the inference that I had just made. Nope. He told me again to wipe the counters or he’d have me written up. What an asshole.

The other managers aren’t much better. In fact, the only person who’s nice to me is the trainer, Patrick. He’s pretty cool, too. He was a server trying to pay his way through college, like the rest of us, but dropped out of school and continued working at CB. When the old ETC had to leave,
he applied for the position. He told me that a lot of the older servers, who are still here from when he was a server, are jerks to him. They don’t like the fact that he has a managerial position, I guess. But he’s nice. I gave him my number so he could text me some cool things to do in Tallahassee. Hopefully there’s something more interesting here than the mall. Maybe he’ll mention some good restaurants and suggest taking me to one? I wouldn’t mind going on a date with someone, anyone, sometime soon. A girl can dream, I suppose.

How’s your school going? I’m glad you’ll be coming closer by next year: It’s kind of lonely without you here. Ali has Gabe and they’re always working or watching movies together, or going to the park together. I just sit in my room practicing or doing the hours’ worth of homework I have due the next day. It’s really monotonous. Maybe Patrick and I can become “friends” outside of work. You know what I mean.

Melissa
Hi Grandma,

I really thought that things would settle down once I had a month or so under my belt, but I was wrong. Completely wrong, Grandma. I’ve never been busier in my entire life. Everyday looks like this:

- 8:00am- Wake-up and eat breakfast.
- 9:00- Warm-up on oboe
- 10:00- Lessons with Dr. Ohlsson. (On Tuesdays/Thursday I have sight singing.)
- 11:00-2:00 Class
- 2:30-3:30: Practice oboe
- 3:30-5:00: Homework of all kinds
- 5:00-6:30: Practice again
- 6:30-7:00: Dinner
- 7:00-9:00: More homework (or band on Thursdays)
- 9:00-10:00: If I haven’t passed out by now, making reeds
- 10:00-11:00: T.V. or winding down.
- 11:30-Bed

It’s exhausting. And if I have lessons with Dr. Ohlsson that particular day, I either feel really fantastic or really awful. It usually depends on how much practicing I get done, which never feels like enough. I go in almost every week feeling unprepared and ready to fail. If only I have more time to practice. People always complain about how much they have to do with their one major, or the fact that their sorority has such and such event going on and they have to be there or they’re going to get kicked out. I don’t mean to complain but I honestly don’t think people understand what it means to be busy. Being a music major is the most demanding major in the entire college. And on top of that, I’m an oboe player, the most demanding instrument in the most demanding major in the entire college. Oh, and I’m a Creative Writing double major. Another demanding major. And I have work 3 days a week. I really wish I didn’t have to work. I would have at least 15 more hours of free time to practice and study more if it wasn’t for work. But tuition is supposed to go up within the next year so I really can’t stop working. I’ve got to start saving for next semester.

It’s a miracle I even make it to my classes every day. I mean, of course I’m going to be in each one; you can’t understand a subject if you’re not there.

I just wonder sometimes if I’m really preparing for “life.” Do people really have to work this hard outside of school? With most professions, it seems like you have to work incredibly hard in college, getting the education you “need” to perform the job. Then, once you get the job, you
learn the procedures and skills through continued practice. You rarely use the classes you were forced to take in college. For example, I have to take a science class sometime in the future. My choices are biology or some other type of weird science that has nothing to do with either of my majors. Why is this necessary? It’s to complete my liberal arts education, but it’s not like I’m going to use the human genome in my music or writing (probably not, at least I’d like to think). So now I’m going to be forced to have tests and papers in a class that has nothing to do with my future outside of college. I just don’t get it.

Enough ranting. It’s not really as bad as I’m making it. I have a few friends that keep me going. Ali and Gabe are pretty cool and seem to understand I’m always busy, which is nice since sometimes I’ll leave dishes in the sink for a few hours. I try to clean them as quickly as I can but sometimes I have to just eat and run. We try to have dinner on most days, like alternate cooking. Ali will usually make some sort of grilled chicken or a salad she’s found in a cookbook (she loves cooking new things), while I usually have to resort to something quick, like spaghetti. Sometimes I feel guilty for not doing something more unique but they always thank me for dinner and tell me that they liked it.

But since Ali and Gabe are inseparable, it’s tough for Ali and me to have alone time to do things. Whenever Gabe comes back from school, they are always together. Gabe usually has to work at night, immediately after dinner, while Ali works during the day, so they spend as much time together as possible. It can be a little bit lonely. I wish Ashley lived in Tallahassee, but I don’t think she’s going to come to FSU. She wants to stay close to home.

“Ash, Tallahassee IS close to home. It’s only 2 hours away!” I said to her, but she just shook her head. She doesn’t want to move out and have to pay rent. Can’t blame her now that I have to pay rent.

I also met this other oboe player in band, Nick. He’s really nice and has similar humor as me. And since we’re both in oboe studio, we make reeds together. It’s nice. I don’t have to get frustrated alone!

So yeah, that’s about it for me. I heard that Emily is having a baby. It’s so crazy to think that my cousin is pregnant! Are you excited about it? You’re going to be a great-Grandma! I wonder if she’ll get married to her boyfriend now. Aunt Cindy doesn’t think she will, but who knows. Babies do all kinds of things for couples.

I’m going to let you go now. I’ve spent WAY too much time on this letter already. I’ll talk to you later.

Love you!

Melissa
Hey girl,

How YOU doin’? Haha! Remember when we used to say that all the time, in that deep voice? I don’t know what made me think of it now, maybe the lack of joy I have in my life right now. God, everything just sucks all the time. Ugh! I’m such a pessimist.

But anyways, what about you? I heard through the grapevine that you’re trying to get a job at CB. That’s awesome! So much better than Sonic, and honestly, I’m surprised you lasted this long without a job. Thought you would have been going crazy without something else besides school. You’re probably rolling your eyes at me right now, but you know that I know that you’re a tireless busy-body. Don’t argue with me!

It’d be so cool if you worked at CB. We may ACTUALLY get to see each other, especially if you’re hired before the holidays, since I’ll be back by then. Yay! It’s kind of sad thinking that I’ll have to work on vacation. I can’t afford not to work though; you know how bad it is with my parents. You’d think they’d have learned finances by now.

I told my GM here that I’m going home, and she looked at me as if her head would explode, like one of those robots from Austin Power’s. Man, that movie is hilarious. We should watch it whenever I’m given permission (from the Queen) to have a weekend off. Sometimes I feel like an indentured servant or something, working here.

So she looked at me pretty hard for a good 20 seconds and then proceeded to ask me if there were any holidays that the Tally store would have me. I wanted to yell “NONE!” but all I said was that I had already promised my old managers that I’d help them out for this holiday season, since they’re so short-handed. She just thinned her lips and walked away. Now I need to call Traci and see if I can come back. I can’t imagine it being a problem.

This store. I honestly can’t find anything I like about it. I come in every fucking weekend and some server is asking me if I’m a new transfer. Have they not seen me every Friday night, Saturday and Sunday? Are they THAT unaware of their surroundings? I took this test once with a bunch of classmates where the computer would switch the colors of a traffic light, and we would have to respond with “Go” or “Stop.” Obviously “stop” was for red. Well, after the computer starting switching faster, more people were saying green means “stop” and not even realizing it. Those people are the equivalent to the people at my job. Just totally unthinking.

I’m being melodramatic, I know. I’m just really antsy to see my mom and be away from school for a little while, even if I do have to work. In all sincerity, if Thanksgiving would have come any later, I probably would have had a mental breakdown.
There is SOME good news. Patrick, the guy from work, well, we’ve been talking quite a bit. It’s pretty exciting, and a nice distraction from school and work. He took me out to Chili’s last weekend and we just had a really good time. I dropped him back off at his place afterwards, since he doesn’t have a car. He told me that he never really needed a car when he was going to school, which is true if you live on campus, and he just never got around to purchasing a car. It sounds weird, but if you don’t have the money, you can’t exactly get a car, right? We might do something this weekend again. Ali and Gabe are going home this weekend, so we’ll see what happens. Now, don’t chastise me, but he’s 28. And yeah, it seems like he’s just after some action, you know, hot 20 year-old, but it’s not like that. He’s really nice to me. Much nicer than everyone else at work has been.

But anyways, I got to let you go. I’ve got so much practicing to do. Playing oboe is such a time-consumer!

Melissa
There’s a man who comes into Cracker Barrel almost every single day and yet none of the servers know anything about him except his name. He goes by Stuart and he orders the same thing every time he comes in. For breakfast he’ll order a Sunrise Sampler with sugar-cured ham, scrambled hard eggs, and sourdough wheat toast. If he doesn’t order that, he orders the Country Morning Sampler which comes with scrambled hard eggs, and either a cranberry muffin or a blueberry muffin. For dinner it’s either meatloaf or roast beef, with soup of the day, tossed salad with Italian dressing, and applesauce for his sourdough wheat toast. He drinks a single glass of water, no lemon, and without a straw. No need for refills. When you’re busy and you have Stuart sitting at your table, you’re a happy server because Stuart is a no-hassle kind of guy. And if it’s a slow day and Stuart is sitting at your table, you’re a happy server because Stuart is the kind of guy you tell all of the day’s little nuisances to. If Stuart likes you and he asks specifically to sit in your section, you are guaranteed a $5 bill. If Stuart likes you, he’ll bring you a small bag of candy that contains 3 types of chocolate bars, usually a fun-sized Hershey bar, Snickers, and a peanut butter Snickers.

I met Stuart the first summer I started working at Cracker Barrel. I was delivering his food, he told me ‘thank you’ and I returned to the kitchen.

“Thanks for bringing out Stuart’s food,” Ciera told me that night.

“Is that guy a regular?”

“Yeah. You don’t know Stuart?” Ciera then took me back out to his table and introduced me as the best new server we have. He smiled politely and told Ciera that I brought out his food excellently.

It was a dumb compliment considering there aren’t exactly multiple ways of bringing out a guest’s food, but I thanked him and remembered him every time he came back to eat. I’d either wave at him or smile when I passed by. Eventually he started asking to sit in my section and thus began our conversations.

It began quite small by simply telling Stuart little things that would go wrong behind the curtains. For instance, Cracker Barrel has a toaster we use for the mornings and a toaster for the evenings. The conventional toaster for the mornings is easy to use; put a piece of bread on the shelf, it toasts on both sides by riding a conveyor belt, and then dispenses on the bottom shelf. The evening toaster is just a regular Wal-Mart-bought toaster. Just as bad quality, too. This toaster, similar to my toaster at home, either takes years to toast a single slice of bread, and does it very unevenly, or burns the toast to a completely inedible stage. Stuart happens to have toast with his evening meal.
“Stuart, I’m sorry, but that toaster is just the worst!” I used to tell him almost every
evening. “It burnt your toast again. I’m toasting some new toast now. Who knows how long it’ll
take with that toaster.” He laughs every time I mention the toaster.

Eventually we started talking about more serious topics, or at least I started talking about
more serious topics. I’d mention school, what I’ll do when I graduate, what kind of profession I
should go into. Stuart politely listens and nods when he agrees.

“What about you, Stuart? I feel like I do all the talking and you never get to say
anything.”

“Oh, I’m not very interesting.”

Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t. I’ll probably never know. And I think I’m okay with that.
Like Caroline and George, Stuart’s position in the Cracker Barrel world is a small one and serves
a singular role. If we knew about Stuart’s background, it would make him more complex, more
human. We need to know him as simple, as the man who orders one of two things every time he
comes in, the man who has water with no lemon. Any more information than that and Stuart
becomes too real to us.

The only thing I do know is that he has godchildren and he spends most of his holidays
with them. I can only assume that he doesn’t have any children of his own, which makes me
think he’s so nice to the servers because of that reason. For our birthdays, he brings us a small
present or card. He tells us things will get better if things are looking especially grim. Like a
weird uncle you always played board games with, Stuart’s presence always brightens our day.
Hi Grandma!

So today is the first day of my Thanksgiving break and I am just so relieved. This break is exactly what I needed. I mean, you know how hard my semester has been so far. It’s so ridiculous…but no matter. I’m home now, and it feels great. My mom is so excited to have me home. She told me that she was going to cook every day I’m home. I told her not to do that since most nights I’ll be working. Yup, working. I transferred back to my home Cracker Barrel for the holidays. They sounded pretty thankful. My general manager practically screamed with joy when I called. It’s nice to be appreciated.

Even though I’ll be working this break, I think I’ll really enjoy it. I haven’t seen my co-workers in a while and hopefully we’ll get a chance to catch up before I go back to Tally. Maybe go bowling or have a get-together at someone’s house. Something like that. I’m just excited to be home! The only issue is the driving. I’ve been so used to driving only 15 minutes to work that driving an hour is going to be hard. Not looking forward to that part.

I do kind of wish that I didn’t have to work quite so much this week; I work every night and then a double on Thanksgiving. I asked for it, so I can’t exactly complain. My mom said I should have taken a couple of days off, but I honestly can’t afford to take off. I have to pay my January rent and electricity, without my scholarships, and I definitely don’t have any money left over. And if I plan on giving anyone anything for Christmas, I have to work. I can’t imagine not working, but I know that a lot of college students don’t have this money issue. Ugh. To be in their shoes right now!

Work will be a little more exciting now that Ashley got a job at Cracker Barrel. I convinced her to apply and voila! Now we shall be co-workers, delving in the service industry together. I’m glad. At least we’ll get to see each other sometime.

But anyways, that’s about it. To answer your question (which I’m sure you can infer), it’s probably no. Mom can’t exactly take off and still pay the bills, and then pay gas money on top of that. And as I said, I don’t have any money for rent or presents. Maybe we’ll be able to come up next Christmas. I certainly hope so.

I’ll write you later. I have work in a couple of hours. Pray I make lots of money.

Love ya!

Melissa Kay
Note: During this time, I’m back in Crestview and working in Destin. Ashley is also working with me, so no letters are written to her during Christmas break.

December 18, 2009

Hey Grandma,

Thank you so much for the birthday card and money! I really needed some money to drive back home for Christmas break. Oh my gosh, Grandma. My first semester of the music program is done! Hallelujah! I’m home for almost three weeks. I don’t have to write any papers, or do theory homework, or practice my instrument every day for 3 hours (though I probably should), or anything. I can literally sit and do nothing. It’s a miracle. Really, it is.

I think my exams went pretty well. I had 4 altogether and I’m feeling really great about all of them. But of course I studied like no other has before. I kind of wish I would have studied with someone, like maybe Nick, but I just didn’t want to wait around for people to find a day when they could meet up, and then end up talking over half the time and accomplishing nothing. Brittany, Ashley, and I used to study really well together. I haven’t really found anyone else like that here. I’ve been quite a hermit though. I think I may have gone out to a movie or something like twice the entire semester. That’s really sad. Hopefully I can change that next semester, but I know that I’ll pretty much have the same exact classes as this semester. For music majors, we have to take 2 years of music theory, 2 years of sight-singing, 2 years of lessons, 1 year of music history and then a bunch of other stuff. So one semester done, 3 more to go. Wow. That’s actually quite a bummer now that I think of it.

Oboe lessons went pretty well towards the end of the semester, especially end of October into November. I really feel like I’m getting the hang of it now, Grandma. When they first began, I felt myself getting buried by all of the expectations of being perfect, and knowing how to make these fantastic reeds, and practicing all the time. They were so unrealistic, and because I set the standards so high at the beginning, I was so discouraged all the time. I’d listen to the older oboe players in masterclass and think “why can’t I sound like that? Why can’t I play that smoothly?” and then I was smacked in the face with reality. They have taken lessons for YEARS AND YEARS. I JUST started taking lessons. Even with the freshman class that I’m a part of, they’ve been taking lessons with professionals since middle school. I only had a single year with my oboe teacher in high school. I can’t compare myself to them! That’s not fair to me, and no wonder I was so depressed all the time.

I started to gauge my lessons by the amount of progress I made each week and eventually I could feel myself start getting better. Even if they were small things, like I wasn’t taking off the corners of my reeds as often, or my middle c wasn’t so raspy-sounding, or I was able to pick up the tempo with more ease than before. I know you don’t really understand my music jargon, but Grandma, I finally get it. It took my scale juries for me to finally realize that I’m not a failure. It sounds melodramatic, I know, but the grad students really made me feel great. I had to play my
scales for them, and they told Dr. Ohlsson that I was the most prepared out of everyone and that I played them almost flawlessly. It was awesome to hear Dr. Ohlsson tell me that the grad students were impressed with me, and that he in turn, was as well. Maybe that’s all I needed. Just a little push. It feels great and I know next semester will be better.

My fiction technique class went really well this semester, too. I wrote this short story about two sisters. One of them is really popular and wears a lot of flashy clothing while the other sister is much more conservative, but wants to bust out of her shell. I actually think the story turned out pretty well. I got an A- on it, which I’m pretty proud of. I really like that class. I’m going to take a nonfiction technique class next semester to see what it’s like. I don’t want to be too overwhelmed with all these classes but I love writing and I think it’s a nice balance with the music classes.

What else has happened? Well, I’m back to working in Destin again. Thanksgiving break was actually really good to me. I made so much money, Grandma, that I don’t have to worry about my rent now. The money I make this break will just be extra. Extra, Grandma. I’m actually going to get to put some money in savings. Truly a miracle. And it was really nice coming back to Destin. So nice that I don’t think I’m going to go back to the Tallahassee Cracker Barrel. It might not seem like the smartest idea, but I’m hoping that if I make a lot of money for the next 3 weeks, I’ll be able to use that money for next semester and then replenish it whenever there is some sort of break. I think it’ll work and honestly, I can’t imagine going back to the Tallahassee Cracker Barrel after being back in Destin. It just reminds me of all the things I don’t like about that store, and I just can’t erase them from my mind. How could I? How can you forget that the managers don’t care to learn your name and don’t really care about you as an individual? It’s not worth it. And if that means I have to come home at least once a month to work (I have to if I work in Destin—they have to show I’m still on the payroll by working at least one day of the month) and I don’t have as much cash to spend, then so be it. I think I’ll be happier in the long run. And if not, well I can always go back to the Tallahassee Cracker Barrel or find a new job.

Long letter, I know, but I have the free time! Ah! Free time! But I’ll let you go. Merry Early Christmas and I’ll talk to you later.

Love ya!

Melissa Kay
Hi Grandma,

You see that date up there? 2010! Can you believe it’s a new year already? Mom was talking about how quickly time goes by. It kind of freaks me out because I don’t think of time like she does, but she’s completely right. Time does go by so fast. I feel like I just came to college, but really this is already my second year. I’ll be graduating in 2 years. What am I going to do then? I haven’t even started thinking about it, but other people in the music program are already thinking about audition material for grad school. People in the English department are writing these awesome stories and having so many revisions done so that the stories are perfect for grad school applications. Just the other day my professor asked me what I plan to do after school. I feel like I should have this answer already but I definitely don’t. And I honestly can’t think about it. If I do, my head will explode. I have way too much stress in the present to think about something that’s 2 years in the future, though I probably should be thinking about it. I just really don’t know what to do. I like music, well, love music, but I don’t know if I see a future with it? What can I do besides performance? I don’t think I have the dedication to do performance. But English isn’t exactly a high-demand major either. Why did I choose two majors that don’t seem to have any future? Probably should have chosen math. Too late now.

Enough worrying. I’m glad to hear that you had a good Christmas! And I’m glad everyone showed up this year. I wasn’t sure if Bobby or Jessie would be able to attend Christmas Eve, since they both have school like me, but I’m glad they were able to take off. I bet Emily’s really showing right now. Is she excited about having the baby? I wish I could rub her belly!

I just started school yesterday. I don’t have too much to do right now except practice. I have try-outs tomorrow for band and I’m not feeling too great about it. There was just so much work, and I’d get home totally exhausted. Who wants to practice when you’ve been on your feet for 8 hours? But that’s not too good of an excuse. I had two days a week that I didn’t work and I could’ve practiced more then. I should have, because now I’m sitting here a day before my try-outs totally unprepared. I don’t know why I do this to myself.

Okay, back to more positive thoughts. I made a lot of money this Christmas break, like crazy amounts of money. It’s good stuff. I called the Tallahassee Cracker Barrel and told them I wasn’t coming back, and I felt a load lifted off my shoulders. Now I can completely focus on my studies. That should help out my stress level this semester.

I guess I’ll let you go. Since school hasn’t really started, I don’t have much to say. I’ll talk to you later!

Love ya!

Melissa
Hi Hi Hi Hi,

I was trying to remember the last time I wrote a letter to you, and I think it was before Thanksgiving break. There obviously wasn’t a point of writing when I was in town, but I was just like “man, I haven’t written Ashley a letter in forever!”

I’m just now getting back into the swing of school. It kind of makes me sad, since I had such a great time being away from school and just working. Isn’t that stupid? That I’d rather be working at Cracker Barrel, unsure of my future and pay, than be at school getting an education? Probably shouldn’t tell my parents that, even though it’s not like they’re paying for my schooling or anything. The state of Florida is paying for it. If I wanted to, I could just drop out of school after the semester and not owe a single penny. I would never do that; talk about idiotic to forfeit a free education.

So anyways, how’s Cracker Barrel since I’ve left? Sorry about that, by the way. I tell you to get a job at Cracker Barrel and then leave a month and a half later. You’ll be okay. I have faith in you. Anyone else leave, though? I swear, Ashley, there were so many different people when I came back for Thanksgiving. A good 5 people left between summer and then. How crazy is that? And there were so many new people! If you wouldn’t have reminded me of everyone’s names I probably would have hollered out the wrong name to someone. How embarrassing would that have been? At least I’d find it embarrassing on my behalf. That shit used to happen all the time in Tallahassee and none of those servers even realized that my name wasn’t “New girl” or “hey” or “Melinda” or whatever they called me. I’m so glad I don’t work there anymore. I know you think it’s stupid for me to quit a job that is so conveniently close to my apartment, and one that I only have to work the weekends, but honestly, it was just miserable. And I was so stressed last semester. I’m not even completely sure how I was able to practice and do all my homework on top of work. Thank God I don’t have to do that anymore.

By the way, have you seen Stuart since I left? I mean, I’m sure you have, but has he eaten in your section? Next time you see him, will you tell him that I said ‘hi’ and ‘thank you.’ He sent me a Christmas card with some money, and I never got a chance to thank him in person. He’s such a nice guy. I’ve never heard him say a mean word to a single person, and he’s always so polite and…well, nice. I’ve enclosed a ‘thank you’ card with this letter, but I’d still appreciate it if you told him again.

I never had nice people like Stuart at the Tally store. I got stuck with people like Patrick, another reason I left that store. I know I kind of shrugged it off at work over Christmas break, but that’s because it’s humiliating. After Thanksgiving break, I met up with Patrick and we were hanging out before he suggested going back to my place. Well, things happened that I
completely regret, and the end result was me driving his sorry ass back to his own apartment. In complete silence. And then he said he’d call me. Well, what a load of horse shit. I went to Cracker Barrel to drop off something and I saw him. He looked at me, panicked a little (I saw him twitch), pretended like he didn’t see me, and then walked back into the server alley.

Of course that didn’t fly with me. I hollered out his name and followed him back into his office. I decided to pretend like I was still really interested in him just to see what he’d say.

“Patrick, how is everything going? Did you have a good Christmas?” I think I was leaning on his desk, twirling my hair. God, I wish you could have seen me.

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was good.”

“Great. I’m glad you had a good Christmas.” At this point, I’m just standing there smiling at him. I’ve got that look in my eye like he’s a sweet piece of key lime pie. He looked at me as if he seriously thought I’d just take a big bite out of his arm or something.

“Look, Melissa,” he began, but I stopped him.

“Why didn’t you call me, Patrick? Don’t you want to date me?” Oh man, Ashley, the look on his face! I think at that point his soul may have melted just a little. Poor, poor sophomore. She actually liked me.

“I don’t really have time for a relationship right now. I’m trying to get managerial training and I’ve got to work 6 days a week and…”

“And I’m 8 years younger than you?”

“No, that’s not what I was going to say.”

“I think we could make this work, Patrick.”

Another grimace. “Maybe sometime in the future when I’m not so busy and I have my life figured out.”

First of all, who, at fucking 28 years of age, working at Cracker Barrel, doesn’t have their life figured out? Obviously you’re working at Cracker Barrel for the rest of it!

I leaned in over his desk and got really close to his face and then stepped back and left the office. I thought about saying something like “FUCK YOU!” or “YOU’RE AN ASSHOLE,” but it’s really not in my nature to be such a bitch. And the truth is I can’t blame him for being an ass to me. If I was him and an attractive 20 year old was into me, I’m sure I’d have some ideas, too. I’d like to think that I wouldn’t just have sex and then not say anything else, but hey, I’m not an ass, so that logic doesn’t apply. I did feel like an idiot after the whole ordeal, especially after I told Ali and Gabe. They thought it was a dumb idea for me to have an older guy like him in the
apartment, alone. In retrospect, I guess it was, but you live and learn. Maybe I should start listening to Alanis Morissette again.

Melissa
Things to Remember at Cracker Barrel

Before you order

1. Wait patiently for the server to approach you. Don’t get upset if the server isn’t at your table within 12 seconds.
2. Be friendly and don’t demand things right when a server appears.
3. Stating that you want a lemon in your water is much better than assuming we will put one in your water.
4. Asking for a new glass of water because you don’t like lemon in your water, and you’re unwilling to fish it out with your fork, is annoying.
5. We will gladly make you a fresh pot of coffee if asked.
6. We cannot control how strong/weak the coffee is.
7. Cracker Barrel only carries half and half. There are no flavored creamers.
8. The only root beer we have is in a bottle and no, there are no refills.
9. We do not have warm apple cider. It is cold.
10. Cracker Barrel does not serve alcohol.
11. Saying ‘thank you’ or smiling after you get your drinks is a lovely gesture.
12. If you’re ready to order when a server is taking your drink order, let them know. We love when you’re completely ready.
13. Read the menu.
14. Read the menu again and realize that some meals do not come with biscuits or cornbread.
15. Don’t argue with a server who has 3-4 stars on their apron about whether a meal comes with bread or not.
16. Don’t argue with a server who has 3-4 stars about a promotional item that was on the menu for a month and has somehow “disappeared” from the regular menu.
17. We serve breakfast all day, every day.
18. It is never possible to cook a Tuesday daily special on a Monday.
19. If you’re not ready to order, we will gladly come back in a few minutes.
20. Order for your children or have them ready to order.
21. Don’t down your sweet tea in a minute and a half and then shake your glass for more sweet tea.

After you order

1. We cannot control the fans or temperature in the building.
2. Shop in the retail store or play checkers as you wait for the meal.
3. Biscuits and cornbread come with the meal, not before, unless specified.
4. If you ask for your bread before the meal, you must ask for bread again when the meal comes, or else you will not receive any.
5. Play with the peg game.
6. Don’t steal 5 peg games from the surrounding tables.
7. Pick up pegs that your 2 year old threw on the ground.
8. Don’t let children eat/spit/chew/jam the pegs.
9. Don’t let children dump out all the sugars in the sugar caddy.
10. We do not remember all of the ways to win the peg game.
11. Yes, we have all won the peg game.
12. We do not know what is playing on the radio station. We unconsciously block it out.
13. Asking how long the food will take several times is frustrating. If ticket times are long, we are already hassling the cooks for your food.
14. Ask for anything you need. Any server. We will gladly get it for you.
15. Shaking your glass for more water is annoying.

During the meal

1. Be understanding when a server is extremely busy.
2. Children that say ‘thank you’ are adorable.
3. “This is a hot plate” is self-explanatory.
5. Sandwiches never come with biscuits.
6. We will charge you for biscuits if your meal does not come with biscuits.
7. Next time, tell the server, when you order your meal, that you didn’t want mayonnaise or tomato on your sandwich.
8. Demanding to know where the rest of your food is when there is another tray standing behind your server, is annoying.
9. Ask for things like extra napkins, butter, maple syrup, jelly, etc. at once.
10. We love to hear that everything tastes delicious.
11. If you need anything, or if we forgot something, let us know instead of holding a grudge that we forgot.
12. All salad dressing comes on the side.
13. Don’t let children throw silverware on the floor.
14. Don’t get angry at the server if the food isn’t tasty. We did not cook the food.
15. Letting us know that we’re doing a great job is a fantastic feeling.

After the meal

1. It’s extremely helpful when you stack your plates.
2. Tell a manager if a server has given you excellent service.
3. Ask a server for change if you need to break a bill.
4. Tidy up after you leave by placing silverware and dirty napkins on your plates.
5. Order our desserts. They’re all extremely delicious.
6. Tip your server.
7. Don’t stay for longer than 15 minutes after your meal.
8. Pay at the cashier stand. Servers do not pay your bill.
9. Don’t say you’re leaving the tip on a credit card and then not leave a tip.
10. Tip at least 15%.
11. Being old is not an excuse for a bad tip.
12. Being old (and forgetful) is not an excuse for walking out without paying.
13. Tip more than 15%.
14. Don’t take the peg games.
15. 18% gratuity is NOT added to parties of 6 or more.
16. Tip your server.
17. Remember that servers get paid about $4 an hour.
18. Tip a server really well if they have given you excellent service.
19. Writing an “IOU” is completely unacceptable.
20. Writing a note stating that you don’t have any change but that you enjoyed my service is completely unacceptable.
21. Don’t apologize for the huge mess under the table your child left, and then leave a $2 tip.
22. Don’t tip in change. Most of us have washers and dryers.
23. Tip your server.
24. Eat fast food if you cannot/will not tip your server.
Happy Valentine’s Day, Grandma!

Did you happen to get my “gift” in the mail yet? If not, expect it sometime today! The gift is also for Don, so you better share with him!

About my last letter, don’t worry about me. I know I complain about my classes and work, but it’s really not as bad as I make it. I’m still making good grades and getting satisfactory remarks from my professors, so all is pretty well. Stress is an issue I deal with continuously, but I’m getting better at handling it. Just yesterday I had a list as long as a mile with things to do. I had to practice, make reeds, do theory homework, practice for a sight-singing exam, read 50 pages, and write a personal essay for the next day. I almost had a panic-attack thinking about all of the things that needed to get done. Instead, I wrote down the list, figured out the amount of time needed for each, wrote out a schedule for the day (right down to the minute) and followed it. Sure, it took almost 10 hours to complete, but I did it. Everything was finished and I still managed to get 6½ hours of sleep (that’s about all I ever get). And the sight-singing test went well today. So it’s definitely not as I stated in the letter before. Maybe I was overly pessimistic or something that day.

I went back home a couple of weeks ago to work, and unfortunately one of my favorite managers left Cracker Barrel. And by left, I think he actually got fired! One of the servers told me that she thinks he was either embezzling money or having a fling with one of the employees. I don’t know if it’s true or not but I honestly can’t think of any other reason he would be fired. And I don’t think that you can just fire someone in a managerial position for something small. But it’s still hard to imagine, especially with John. He was always so nice to me, very funny too, and if I ever needed any help, like with a scheduling conflict or side work assistance, he would always find a way to do what he could for me. And now he’s gone, and possibly for stealing money from the company he was employed at! That is so crazy to think about and really, quite ridiculous. Why would you take money from a company that is offering you financial security (with pretty good pay, I would think) and health care? I just don’t understand. How ungrateful are people like that? I feel like that would be equivalent to me trying to cheat the state of Florida out of 4 more years of school after they’re already paying for my classes. Hopefully he didn’t embezzle money. But to imagine him sleeping around with an employee isn’t much better. Everyone is told on the first day of work that relationships between employees and managers are forbidden, and with good reason! You can’t have managers showing favoritism to particular employees. Even if he didn’t show any favoritism, if any of the servers or cooks suspected that he was being nicer to another server, or giving her easier side work than another, that’s a serious problem. People would question the fairness and respectability of the company. It’s just bad news altogether. I can’t imagine John doing something that dumb and irresponsible, but I guess people do things like that every day.
But since John is gone, the managers were scrambling around that weekend. It’s really hard for them to remain calm whenever they don’t have all the managers on the floor, since they feel so overwhelmed. One of the managers was on the grill line (we were short 2 cooks) and the other was setting up food, and having to deal with the growing line of waiting guests and the cashier issues. It’s just a bad situation. The food ends up taking twice as long as it should, and the guests get incredibly impatient. Then when they get their food, it took so long to set it up in the window that now the eggs are cold, or they were cooked incorrectly, so they’re sent back. Now the cooks have to not only keep up with the orders constantly coming in, but re-make orders that have just gone out. This causes problems for us servers because though we know that the grill line is busy, we also have to keep our guests happy, and we need the reorder as quick as possible. And on top of all of that, food costs become incredibly high, and the store takes a hit from the Cracker Barrel Corporation. This usually isn’t an issue if we have 3 managers on the floor, like we do on most Saturday morning, but like I said, we only had 2. Traci was yelling at everyone as they came into the server alley. It was pretty crazy. I hope they have a new manager next time I work.

That’s about it for now, Grandma. Don’t worry about me down here in Florida. You just be careful up there with all that snow. I saw on the Weather Channel that you’ve gotten like 6 inches of snow over the past week. Not going to lie, I’m really glad I don’t live in Indiana anymore. I hate being cold. So sorry for you!

Love you,

Melissa
What’s up, Woman?

I didn’t see you this past weekend at work. I guess I could have called and asked where you were, or called and asked right now, but I felt like writing a letter instead.

When I went to work, everyone told me that Kathy and Chuck had moved to Georgia. That makes me so sad! I didn’t get to say goodbye or anything to them. And Kathy used to help me out at night when I was just learning all the side work stuff.

If that wasn’t enough, I found out that same day that Jocelyn and Jessalynn also left CB. What the hell? What is happening to everyone? Why is everyone deciding to quit? Kassy told me that Jocelyn decided to only work at Publix, which makes a lot of sense, and that Jessalynn found a new breakfast place to work at. I think she said it was at ‘Another Broken Egg Café.’ I mean, I don’t really care too much about Jessalynn leaving, since she was quite annoying anyways. One time she suggested that I wasn’t very attractive. Yeah! I had a table full of guys and I thought for sure I’d get a pretty good tip. I did everything for those guys, too. I went back and filled their sweet tea probably like 5 different times, and brought them extra maple syrup for their pancakes, and smiled a lot, and you know. Just being extra attentive. There were 4 guys and I think they each left me like $1.50. It wasn’t a bad tip or anything, but I was expecting at least $8.

I told Jessalynn about it and she just shrugged her shoulders and said, “We can’t all impress the guys.”

“A young, blonde, attractive server can’t impress them?”

“Maybe they didn’t think you’re attractive.”

“You don’t think I’m attractive?”

She just shrugged her shoulders. I get that I’m not exactly in the most stylist clothing imaginable; I’ve got my hair pulled back against my head, I’m wearing Dickies, a stupid brown apron made of God-knows-what indestructible material, and a boy’s blue Oxford shirt, but seriously? That made me feel real good about myself. What a bitch. She always says the wrong thing. I wonder if someone was a total douche bag to her or something and told her she’d never get a date (or something equally mean) when she was growing up, and she feels she has to be super blunt with everyone or something. Like, I remember she did something similar to you, too. It was that weird dress you own. Sorry, that dress is definitely weird, and you wore it when we all went to Chili’s, and Jessalynn said something like “oh my god, where did you get that thing from?”

I remember giggling a bit on the inside, but damn, it was harsh.
I don’t really care if Jessalynn is gone. It does kind of make it harder to hang out with everyone, though. Like, you know how sometimes we’ll just decide on a whim to throw a party at Kassy’s, and then all the CB people show up after they get off? Well, now there are fewer people that’ll go to the party, most likely at least, because they don’t work at CB anymore. You know what I mean? It’s not as cool without everyone being there.

Oh, so I also met the new manager, Steven. He seems like a pretty cool guy, though that thick southern accent kills me. I asked if he was from Alabama and he just gave me a look like “what do you think?” Did he tell you how long he’s been working at CB? Like, forever. He started as a server there, while he was attending community college, and worked his way to being a cook, to a trainer, and then to management. I didn’t know people still did that kind of thing, except Ms. Traci. I knew she did that, but still. Could you imagine being at CB for longer than 3 years? God. Is he satisfied with working there? Or is it because he can’t get another job?

But anyways, I come home for Spring Break on the 25th. Thank God. I don’t know if college ever gets easier. I thought it did, but I could be wrong.

See you then,

Melissa
March 28, 2010

Hey Grandma,

Sorry it’s been so long since I’ve written you. Once again, this semester has proven to be quite difficult. Thank goodness I’m on Spring Break right now. I swear the vacations come at the right time.

I have this class that is seriously giving me some hassle. It’s a nonfiction technique course and I was really looking forward to it, especially since my fiction technique course was so much fun last semester. Well my teacher is just a baboon. Yes, Grandma, she’s a baboon! I honestly don’t know what’s wrong with the woman; she just tries to make life so much more difficult for us students. I’m not being dramatic. Let me explain.

My teacher told us at the beginning of the semester that the class was mostly broken up by projects. There are 4 in total and she told us the first project would be the most difficult. Boy, she sure wasn’t kidding. The topic was really broad; anything that can be considered a cultural or political issue. I immediately thought of music classes are really having a difficult time in society, especially with people thinking that they are too costly or unimportant. Well, my teacher said that the topic had been beaten to death and that it’s not interesting enough. I resent that idea, but I understood why she said it. So many reporters and newspapers have covered cuts in music programs for years. It’s old news, but still relevant. She told me that if I could make it more up-to-date or write the topic with a new angle, it could work. I decided to compare 2 different elementary school music programs, one in Tallahassee and one in Crestview, to see how exactly they differed. What I found out was that the Tallahassee school had so much more than small-town Crestview. They have more musical instruments, a bigger room, more paintings on the wall, etc. The elementary teacher told me that they never have problems getting money from the school district and that they have elementary school music performances frequently. I was really impressed!

Crestview was so bare compared to Tallahassee. The room was small and had a few laminated posters on the wall, a couple of drums in the corner and about 20 chairs in front of a chalk board. I talked to the music teacher (who I actually had as a music teacher at one point—it was bizarre) and he told me that it’s difficult to get any money from the school district. The classes only meet once a week for about 50 minutes and performances are few. He also included, quite bitterly, that standardized testing was part of the culprit. Schools are so completely focused on getting good grades on these tests that they neglect other aspects of a child’s education. It’s really a shame. But anyways, I got these great video interviews of these teachers, had to spend hours formatting the video, spent a good amount of time with the Prezi (kind of like a slide-show
performance), and made it really appealing to the eye. My teacher gave me a “B” on the project. I was so upset! I had spent so much time and effort on this project and her only comment was that she thought the male teacher (from Crestview) rambled too much and that I should have edited the clips. So much frustration.

The next project was significantly easier, but I still got a “B” on it. And not really much to improve on either. She told me that she liked the topic (I wrote a personal essay on my mom) but that there were a few grammatical errors. I have no idea what they were (I edited the paper like 3 times since she told us at the beginning of the semester that she is really into correct grammar) and she never told me. She told me that I could edit it again and re-turn it in for a better grade, which I did, and only got a B+ on it.

And another irritating thing is that she cancels class constantly! It wouldn’t really bother me if she would tell us more than 10 minutes in advance. We’ll all be sitting in her class and someone will come in and say “class is cancelled.” This has happened 3 times already.

But besides that class with that teacher, everything else is alright. Busy, like always, but alright. I went home to work yesterday and everyone was like, “Oh my gosh, Melissa! Where have you been?” It was nice since everyone got so excited to see me and asking all kinds of questions about school and everything. They specifically ask me if I’m working in Tallahassee and when I say no, they say I’m crazy. It may not be the best idea to completely quit working in Tallahassee, but for my sanity’s sake, I have to do it.

That’s really it, though. Just school. And work. At least that’s what I’m doing for Spring Break. I’m kind of jealous that everyone else gets to go on a cruise or on vacation, or even just lounging on the beach. I work every day this week. I asked for it, yes, but I wish I didn’t have to work. I bet I’ll make lots of money though!

I’m glad you enjoyed the popcorn tin for Valentine’s Day. That cheddar popcorn is definitely my favorite. And those chocolate hearts! Mmmm. So yummy.

Love you, Grandma!

Melissa
Note: Ashley had decided to stay at a near-by college to get her Associate’s degree while I had left for FSU for a 4-year degree. While I tried to convince Ashley to come to FSU after she graduated, she decided on the University of West Florida, a school in Pensacola.

May 10, 2010

Ashley,

I guess some congratulations are in order! I bet you’re pretty excited to graduate from NWFSC. That place is so damn small, it’s about time you start going to a university. I mean that with love, of course. I wish you’d come to FSU instead of going to UWF. I could really use someone else in Tally besides my stupid roommates. They just suck the life out of me! The other day, Ali was telling me that I need to clean up my dishes in the sink when I finished cooking. Umm, I’ll clean up my shit after I’ve finished the meal I just made thank you very much. What’s the point of washing all the pots and pans before you start eating, when you know that you’re going to have to clean the fork, knife, and plate you just used? And I’m not a goddamn dish boy. I don’t clean on demand like they’re paid to do at work. In fact, I don’t like being demanded to do anything, unless I’m getting paid. Traci can demand that I sweep the floors, and I will, because that’s my job. James can demand that I roll 2 pans of silverware and I will, because that’s my job. Al is not my manager, nor my mom, so why does she think she can tell me to clean up my dishes IMMEDIATELY after I’m finished with them? Who does that anyways, besides them? She’s just really getting on my nerves. Gabe tries to be the mediator, kind of, but always sides with Ali anyways. Next year, I’m living by myself. Fuck having roommates. I obviously don’t get along with people I live with. Learned that from my freshman year with Britt and now this year with Ali and Gabe. And now I have to spend the summer with them also. Perfect. Just perfect.

Enough bitching. How’s life? How’s work? I heard we got ANOTHER new manager. It’s bizarre that Cracker Barrel can’t seem to hold onto any of their managers. They’re long-term employees, you know what I mean? With the servers, I can understand that people leave pretty frequently; no one wants to have their “career” as a CB server. But managers? Man, they’re supposed to be staying there for a pretty decent amount of time. Whatever. How is this new guy, though? I talked to Kassy and she said he was a prick, and that he’s pretty pretentious. Great. As if Traci didn’t give us enough hassle with her passive aggressive nature. You know she used to treat me like shit when I first started working there. She was always telling me something I was doing wrong. About a month ago, she tried to do the same thing when I was rolling silver beside the window.

“Isn’t there something else you could be doing besides rolling silverware, Melissa?”

I kept rolling. “All my tables are eating and I’ve just refilled all of their drinks.”

“What about your side-work?”
I stopped rolling and looked straight at her. “My side-work is back tea. I’ve got a back-up tea brewing right now, I just changed the sanitizer water, and wiped down the counters. And now I’m rolling silverware but when you call for a runner, I’ll be the first one to run the food.” I smiled at her and started rolling again.

“Fair enough,” was all she said.

But I mean seriously. Of all people to yell at, she picks me, the one person who is ALWAYS doing something. And she sees it, too. I’m always wiping down the counters, brewing coffee, running food, filling up the straws, etc. She couldn’t say anything to me that time because she knew I was right! She hasn’t said anything to me since. And she doesn’t have to. I’m a good server! Treat me like one. Jesus.

Oh my god, I almost forgot to tell you who I saw the other day. None other than PATRICK! That guy from the Tally CB. I was at Wal-Mart and we both saw each other and did that ‘Should I acknowledge that I know who he/she is’ awkward stance. We both ended up standing too long staring for either of us to walk away.

“Hey! How’s it going?” he asked me.

“Pretty good. How are you?” I looked into his cart. It had about 5 different types of Hungry Man microwaveable dinners, a bunch of bananas, and a 6-pack of Miller Lite.

“Good. Good.”

“Great. How’s the old Cracker Barrel?”

“It’s good. Yeah…good.”

“Good.” At this point, I’m trying to find a way to turn my cart around and head in the opposite direction.

“Sorry I never called you after Christmas,” he said.

“That’s alright.”

“You’re just a little bit too young for me.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I mean, I don’t want you thinking I’m an asshole or anything…”

I’m rolling my eyes at this point. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay. Well, it was good seeing you.”

“Yup.”
And then we both left. There were a lot of things I wanted to say to him, but looking at that cart and knowing that he still works at Cracker Barrel made me change my mind. I actually felt kind of bad for him. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

Rant over. I won’t be back until the end of June. Yay summer classes.

Melissa
Hi Grandma,

Well, I’m back in school. Again. The spring semester ended at the end of April and lucky me, I have to stay for the summer in order to catch up. It’s on for the first half of the summer but it’s still really a bummer. I just want to go home. I’m tired of being in Tallahassee and I can barely stand my roommates anymore. Ali and Gabe kind of team up on me so that they can do whatever they want. Whether it is about the AC or the heat, or cleaning the apartment. I’m pretty clean, but I’m not exactly a housewife when it comes to hardcore cleaning like Ali and Gabe. They regularly vacuum, scrub the floors, wash the windows, dust etc. Ever since I started working at Cracker Barrel, the last thing I want to do is clean. I ALWAYS have to sweep the floors at work and after 10 minutes, they’re disgusting again. I almost don’t even see the point. And washing dishes? I don’t like doing them directly after I eat either. But I mean, it’s not really fair to hold me to the same standards they have for themselves since I’ve just been so incredibly busy this semester with the music program and with that one English class that has caused me so much hassle. (I ended up having to explain to her why I should get an ‘A’ in the class. Isn’t that bizarre?) They always seem to have plenty of time to clean house, and bake, and cook gourmet meals, and join clubs, and see movies, etc. It’s really weird though because they both hold a job, and go to classes, though Ali tends to skip a lot of her classes. They don’t take attendance like mine do and she doesn’t have daily assignments, only tests. I don’t know if I’d really like that though. That means you have to do really well on all of your assignments because you have so few of them. But they expect me to be able to do all of the same. I barely have time to finish all my homework and practicing every day, much less to cook. And she got mad at me over this, the fact that I don’t cook for them but she does for me. I told her we should just cook for ourselves since I’m really never going to have time to cook anything but spaghetti and she gave me a scowl. I mean, what am I supposed to say to that?

And then there was the dog issue. Gabe and Ali bought a dog and our apartment complex doesn’t allow them. Well, management found out and billed Ali for it. Ali then went to the office and I guess those people wanted to cause more of a rift between us because they said that I told them about the dog. Ali was so furious and I couldn’t tell her enough times that I never said anything about the dog. Why would I? It’s not my dog. I don’t think she believes me.

So it’s just kind of awkward staying at my apartment now. Luckily I have a friend here that I can hang out with. If not, I’m not sure I could survive!

The classes I’m taking are music theory classes since I had to take an introduction music theory class in the fall. I had no experience with music theory so I didn’t have a choice. The other is a sight singing class. I’m not looking forward to that class at all. I had to take sight singing last semester and it’s the worst. They just give you a page and tell you to sing it. And you’re expected to sing it pretty well. We do exercises to help up with the different notes and
intervals but honestly, that isn’t enough. I have no idea how I passed that class and now I have to take another one. Hopefully it goes better!

Since I don’t have so many classes over the summer, I’ll be practicing a lot more. I can feel myself getting better each day, but I’m not at the level that I’d like to be at, and that’s hard to handle when there are so many good players around you. There’s this one guy in my grade in oboe studio that’s amazing. Granted he’s been taking lessons for quite some time, but it’s hard not to compare myself to him. Or to another guy in my level. I don’t even think oboe was his first instrument and he sounds better than I do. And there just seems to be such a gap between those 2 guys and me. I’m tired of it. I think some serious practicing will really do me some good.

Work has been going pretty well. I’ve been back a couple of times and I get the same questions every single time. “Where have you been?” “Do you work in the Tallahassee store?” “Why do you drive back just to work here for a day?” “When are you coming back for good?” “What are you even doing in Tallahassee” etc. And then there are always so many new people coming in. I can’t help feeling like an outsider, sometimes.

That’s it for now.

Love you!

Melissa
Hey Grandma,

It seems like every time I write you, there’s some type of major change in my life. For example, I’ve finished my summer classes. Yup. Last time I wrote you I was just starting them and now they’re over. My mom is always telling me that time goes by so quickly. I really hate when she says that though. It makes experiences seem like they only last for a short amount of time and that you’ll never have enough time to enjoy them when they’re happening. It’s just such a depressing way of viewing things. I’d like to think that time doesn’t go by too quickly for us not to enjoy life. But I know what she means.

My classes went by without a hitch. The sight singing class was pretty hard, but it wasn’t too bad. I had the same teacher I’ve had for the past 2 semesters and then we got a new teacher for the second half of the summer. It was really bizarre but he told us that he couldn’t stay for the whole summer and neither could the other teacher so they split the summer. Very weird, really.

I’m glad to be going home though. Things really heated up with Ali, Gabe and me when I found out that Gabe wasn’t going to pay for the July rent. Since he technically wasn’t supposed to be living with us, he isn’t on the lease, and we 3 split the rent. Well, since he isn’t “technically” going to be living in the apartment in July, he shouldn’t have to pay for rent. At least that was their argument. I was furious because I was counting on that rent money to pay for the rent for my new apartment. They were thinking the same thing. Ali then casually mentioned how she had to pay the fee for the dog when “technically” I was living with the dog as well. Luckily my friend Nick was there so neither of us blew up but I could feel the heat coming out of my body. This is the last time I ever room with people. Thank goodness I’m heading back home. Mom is much easier to deal with than college kids. I know that sounds weird, considering I’m a college kid myself, but I feel like living with people my own age brings out the worst in everyone. In Ali and Gabe’s case, they hassled me to no end because I wouldn’t do things their way. In my case, I defied them sometimes on purpose, and I held a grudge almost the entire second semester. I doubt we’ll talk again.

Yes, home will be a lovely change. And work, too. I know what to expect when I go into Cracker Barrel. I know I’ll have to roll silverware, do some side work, and serve some people. Sure, I never know what kind of people I’ll be serving; they could all be punks, but it’s kind of expected. And there’s something satisfying about knowing what you do every day. I know what time I have to work every morning, which days, and I don’t have work to bring back home. Plus, I get a paycheck. Don’t get me wrong, school is great, but sometimes I feel like I work so hard for a prize that’s not even that great. Yes, I’ll have my degree, but I can’t really do anything with it until I get my master’s, which is even more school. Especially now where the master’s is the new bachelor’s. People have finally realized that you can’t really get anywhere with a bachelor’s degree, since they really aren’t career specific (you honestly only get about 2 years of experience
in your field with a bachelor’s) and so everyone has decided to get more schooling. Good news for employers, but bad news for all of the people getting master’s degrees at the same time. They have to compete with not only the general public, but with others who now have a master’s as well. It sure makes getting a job much harder. Though getting a job in either of my majors will be impossible without a master’s anyways. Too bad I enjoy something that requires a lot of mastery. But now that I’ve been in school and worked at a job, I can understand why people don’t continue on with college. Don’t worry though. I’ll graduate college. It’s just my nature.

I’ll write more later.

Love ya,

Melissa
Why hello again,

By the time you read this letter, I’ll already be on my way home. Yay! We’ll get to work together and go to the beach and NOT do anything school related. Oh my god I can’t even wait. And I won’t have to deal with Tallahassee for a couple of months!

Oh, and the whole Ali and Gabe thing blew up in my face again. I was asking Gabe for rent money and he refused, and then Ali mentioned the stupid dog and how I probably told the office about it and how she had to pay the whole fee when I live in the same apartment with the dog. What the hell? As mad as I am about the whole thing, it really makes me upset, too. Ali and I used to be such good friends last year. We used to do the dumbest shit, like stealing play sand, or running around campus at night, or going to breakfast for $1. The breakfast for $1 was the best. For whatever reason, FSU offers pancakes, eggs, bacon, all kinds of breakfast food, at midnight, for $1. It’s crazy. We just stopped doing that once Gabe moved in. And now we can’t even look at each other. It’s really unfortunate. We’ll probably never talk again.

I’m starting to wonder if anything will ever get easier (I actually just mentioned this to my grandma, but I don’t know if she completely understands. I have a feeling her schooling was probably way less pressure than what we have to deal with today). In middle school, I worked hard to get awards. In high school, I took AP classes and honors classes and joined clubs in order to get into college. Now in college, I have to work hard just to keep my head above the water. It never seemed this hard in high school, even when we had 5 AP classes a day and band for 2 hours. I thought college was supposed to be easier and better because it was something you wanted to do. They never told us that we’d have ridiculous teachers that take off 5 points for a missed comma, and 80 pages of reading every night, and 4 papers a month. They never told us that you’d have to give up all your free time for either homework or work because you can’t pay for that $156 biology textbook you need by next class period, or that tuition would be raised 15% every year you stay in school. Seriously, another tuition increase. I don’t know. I’m just glad to be coming home. All I have to think about is working. And work is easy. Don’t you sometimes wish we were those types of people, the ones who take the easy way out of everything? I wish I could do that. God, now I’m depressed.

I don’t feel like writing anymore, and I’m going to see you in like a day. We’ll talk more then.

Melissa
15 Things Every Cracker Barrel Server Knows (or should know):

1. Never set down the good trays. You’ll end up with the tray that has spilled orange juice, gravy, coffee, jelly, etc.
2. Julia and Lori are the nicest people in the world. Period. End of discussion.
3. If you’re the last morning shift person to come in, you will have middle delfield (or also known as ‘the cooler from hell’).
4. If you’re the last night shift person to come in, you will have middle delfield. Damn.
5. Stand far away from the milk delfield when squeegee-ing out the bottom. There’s probably a standing lake of 2 ½ in. deep water.
6. Wet towels can be stolen from the following people: Lori, Britni, Tiffany, Shannon, Sam and sometimes Julia. Don’t take Julia’s towel because she’s the nicest person in the world.
7. When tasting the peach tea for sweetener, take the smallest swig possible. You’ll regret it if you take half a glass.
8. Bel is small but Bel is mighty.
9. Don’t play softball with the biscuits and a broom. Just don’t.
10. If it’s your last day at work and you bring in cookies, Dawn will bring in muffins for passing her par test.
11. Being nice to the host(ess) on duty is always a good idea.
12. There are never enough spoons. Never.
13. Talking about how much fat is in your morning oatmeal or how many calories are in the biscuits is cool.
14. Just because the shift starts out slow doesn’t necessarily mean it will stay that way. And vice versa.
15. Ashley and Melissa are known as “the sisters,” “the dynamic duo,” “the dream team,” “the wonder twins,” etc. Don’t forget.