

Kurt Schmidt

My Boss Said I Should Learn to Wash the Baby

I once had a boss who was a chef and advised me that women liked sex long and slow. He said the way he avoided climaxing too soon was to plan the next day's dinner menu in his head during the act. I've had quite a few bosses, each one an authoritarian overseer of my many different careers — chef's assistant, waiter, janitor, handyman, inn-keeper's assistant, inspector of women's brassiere straps, factory worker, draftsman, computer magazine editor, troubleshooter of water stills and demineralizers, mechanical engineer, sales engineer, and a long career as a software technical writer.

At a summer resort where I became a salad man for a portly chef, I learned that "Louis" wanted to have an affair with one of the waitresses and would apply his philosophy about women if it transpired. He said, "Women like sex long and slow, and that's what Biddy's going to get when the time comes. I can go so long with a woman she's screaming by the time it's over." When I asked how he delayed climaxing, he said, "I think of something else. If I start getting that feeling, I just concentrate on something else...like planning the next day's dinner menu." His words became the prophecy for my own romantic involvement that summer with a lithe dancer who worked as a waitress at one of the hotels.

As the only male waitperson at the Carpenter Hotel restaurant, I had this feeling of isolation. I learned that waitresses used nasty language and all sorts of excuses to avoid waiting on rich, old Mister Gould. A salty waitress named Rosemary said she didn't like "serving rich bastards because they leave tips as small as their peckers." I learned too that my education didn't mean I was privileged. When I became testy about filling salt and pepper shakers, Evelyn Gillespie took me aside instead of firing me and said she knew I was only a salad man at the summer resort, not a waiter. So I apologized. I thought if people were going to catch my lies, I'd better consider a more truthful approach to life.

After IBM hired me as a new engineering graduate from Michigan State University and I'd completed their eight-week training course in Detroit, the training manager said I wouldn't make a good sales engineer. "We've evaluated the work of all the trainees in the program. The trainees who've been at IBM longer than new hires like you obviously have an advantage because they already understand IBM products and services. We appreciate the effort you've put in while you were here, but in the end we decided your talents aren't really suited to our work." Fired after just eight weeks.

Several years later, a manufacturing supervisor at Honeywell became impatient with the time I was taking to troubleshoot a tricky electro-mechanical device and said I'd better get with it, because he was going to the top and didn't care whose back he had to climb over to get there. Because I'd planned to quit this job soon and begin work full-time on writing a novel, I did not worry him stomping on my back.

While I worked on the novel, I took several odd jobs. My boss at International Narrow Fabric said he could groom me to become overseer of

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the weaving mill, where they wove women's brassiere straps. (You had to make sure the rubber strands had no breaks when the strap came off the loom.) I didn't say I intended to become a famous writer instead.

When my future wife moved to Boston to pursue her master's degree at BU, and I was struggling to write a second novel after my first one had been published, I followed her and took temp jobs. During that time, I also took a free Massachusetts course in computer programming. With my writing background, the course managers said I should try to sell myself as a software technical writer.

When I arrived at LTX in Norwood for my first interview, I had no technical writing samples to offer. So I pulled out my hardcover of *Annapolis Misfit* and laid it in on the personnel manager's desk. She seemed impressed and sent me down the hall to meet with the technical writing supervisor. On my way to his office, she must have called him and said enthusiastically that she was sending him a novelist, mechanical engineer, and recent computer programming graduate. In the supervisor's office, he seemed immediately ready to hire the maverick that I appeared to be, instead of some experienced tech writer.

After a couple years there, I went to work for Digital Equipment Corporation in Littleton, Massachusetts, because they were closer to southern New Hampshire. Now married, my wife, Shelley, and I planned to move back to my old childhood house there. She and I returned to New Hampshire the summer before Jesse was born. Her Caesarian section occurred late on a Friday night at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, and she was still groggy the next morning. So I held Jesse most of Saturday and Sunday until the nurses took him away each night. I hated leaving the hospital Monday morning for my job. Fortunately, my boss there was a woman — Kathleen. On her advice, I rushed back to the hospital Monday afternoon with the news that Kathleen's own husband didn't help with the kids. She said he usually walked down the street to a friend's house when their kids acted out, which she supposed was better than his hiding in their attic. Kathleen said I should return to the hospital and learn how to wash the baby. And so I did.

Giving our son his bath each night was the beginning of a time when I fell so deeply in love with this child. Over the years, Jesse may have thought I was the boss. But underneath all the emotions, I knew he was really in command of our lives.