

ONE: ONE BIG FAMILY

Steve, 27, the night manager at the Skylight Diner, stands behind the counter eyeing a disheveled, middle-aged man smiling into his coffee. It's 3:30 AM on a Thursday and the man has been there since 5 the previous evening.

"Need something?" Steve asks him.

The man giggles and replies, "First, a psychiatrist; second thing, a girl; third thing, a job." The man launches into a story about massage school, and then offers a free massage to Steve. Steve rolls his eyes and turns the channel on the television overhead to a rerun of *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*:

"This is funny," says Steve, pointing up at a young Will Smith. "Watch this."

Steve moves his considerable frame down the length of the counter, putting some distance between himself and his would-be masseur.

The Skylight is almost always busy. That's partly because of its location on 34th Street, a two-way thoroughfare that conveniently links the Copacabana nightclub to Penn Station with the Skylight in between. It also happens to be around the corner from the 35th Precinct of the New York Police Department (NYPD), attracting a steady stream of hungry nightshift police officers. But mostly it's the blue-and-red neon sign framed in stainless steel that beckons patrons at all hours of the night: Open 24 Hrs.

Inside, the Skylight is all gleam and polish. Its Art Deco stylings give it that classic diner aesthetic: black and white tile, stainless steel fixtures, and a menu designed to feel oversized and intimidating in your hands. There is a counter to the left that curves seductively from the entrance to the kitchen, with swivel stools on one side, coffeemaker, shake machine, and pie case on the other. To the right, there are booths for the more leisurely, two rows of black vinyl that extend back to a mirrored wall, creating the comforting illusion that the diner could go on forever.

Large black-and-white photos of New York City in the 1930s and 1940s suggest some connection to the legacy of prewar diners, but something is amiss. The food is satisfyingly familiar—overstuffed sandwiches, burgers, breakfast anytime—but there is a sheen to everything that suggests the Skylight is an overbright redux of the original. In short, it is clean. Too clean.

Steve holds court behind the aquamarine Formica counter. He is an imposing figure, dressed entirely in black, but he moves from customer to customer with surprising grace for a man his size. “I eat once a day, believe it or not,” he explains. “One big meal, and then I go to sleep. That’s why I’m so big.” Steve has managed the Skylight for only a few months, but he’s worked in diners as a busboy, waiter, or manager since junior high, almost always on the nightshift.

Two cops push through the front door and Steve gives them a nod.

“How ya’ been?” he asks them.

“We’re really busy out there,” one of them says. He settles onto a stool and smiles at the man who is still trying to give Steve a massage. “There’s drunk people everywhere.”

Steve can relate. As a manager on the nightshift, he has seen a fair number of intoxicated and otherwise rowdy customers. At night, inhibitions are lowered and a wider range of behavior is tolerated. But there is always a limit. He shares a story from his “old diner,” where he worked for nine years. It still makes him laugh. “One night,” he begins, delivering his lines with the rhythm of a practiced comedian, “I was managing and the busboy comes to me and says, ‘You know what, Steve, there’s two people in the bathroom having sex.’ So I go to the bathroom, I knock on the door, because it was the women’s, you know, and I opened up and the

guy was with the girl in the stall. You know, they had the door closed. So I said, 'Hey!' and they didn't answer. And you know, you could see the movements. So I kicked the door in, and he was like, 'Whoa, what are you doin'!' 'What am I doing?' I says, 'What are you doing?' He goes to me, 'It's okay, I know John,' he says. He's the manager. I was like, 'I don't give a fuck who you know, pull your fucking pants up.' He was like, 'Come on, I've been coming here for years.' Unbelievable sometimes." Sure enough, tonight, four hours after he says this, Steve finds a teenage couple having sex in the men's room in the Skylight's dank basement.

Steve says that drunk people sometimes tip less, sometimes more. "Depends on the people." He places a paper cup upside down on one of the coffee machine spigots. This is diner code for don't-use-that-spigot, as they have to be cleaned out between batches. "The best," he continues, "are the Irish. They order a cheeseburger and I give them eggs, they eat it, and they leave a five-dollar tip. Greeks too, but they make you work for it, they'll send it back five times. I say that and I'm Greek."

But not all those who come to the Skylight after dark are looking to refuel after the last call at local bars and clubs. Steve knows the rhythm of the nightshift from experience, watching the evening rush spill into the late-night stillness and then back into the hurried pace of early morning. Customers who come in after dark are just as likely to be shift workers on break as late-night revelers. "Night is young people," Steve explains. "Occasionally, you get elderly. But they don't come out too late, like after 2. But then you start getting the morning people, who are going to work."

Diners have long served the overlapping and variable schedules of shift workers—and they have always been associated with the night. Richard J. S. Gutman explains in *American Diner* that the first in New York City opened in 1893. It was a horse-drawn "night lunch wagon" operated by the Church Temperance Society in hopes of drawing business away from bars and their ten-cent meals. For thousands of old-world immigrants, mostly young men, the night lunch wagon was a surrogate for home and a moment's rest. They were so successful they became the charitable beneficiaries of wealthy New Yorkers such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, who endowed a night lunch wagon in Union Square.

By the 1920s, public lighting opened up the city streets to regular late-night commerce and the old night lunch wagons conveniently forgot their altruistic roots. There was too much money to be made. The eateries put down foundations and were dubbed “dining cars,” alluding to the railway experience and retaining the idea of meals on the move. Their manufacture and aesthetic became standardized—tethered to the streamlining of American industry throughout the first half of the last century.

Within twenty years, the shortened “diner” would be permanently fixed in the popular romantic imagination. First Edward Hopper and then Hollywood cast the diner as the model setting for urban social interaction, or lack thereof. Both contributed to the image of the diner as the one place where those whose consciences would not let them sleep could be alone, together. What began as a philanthropic outreach to new immigrants became part of a manufactured image of immigrant cities such as New York—dark, dangerous, overcrowded, and yet strangely alienating and lonely.

Today, the diner remains an archetype of urban social space, though it has undergone a series of transformations since the postwar period. Suffering a steep decline in the 1960s with the rise of fast-food chains, the diner was resurrected by Greek immigrants in the 1970s. The Greek influence not only contributed moussaka to the standard menu, it kept the image alive long enough for restaurateurs to see the market for diner nostalgia. By the late 1980s diners like the Skylight were being built to look exactly like the “dining cars” of the 1930s and 1940s.

As a result, New York is home to a varied collection of all-night eateries that fall roughly into the category of “diner.” A veritable museum of dinerdom, the city has the early mass-produced “dining car” models, such as the Cheyenne around the corner from the Skylight on Ninth Avenue; the Greek reinterpretations, such as the North Shore Diner in Queens; and the nostalgic recreations such as the Skylight. Together they manifest the continuity of the city feeding its sleepless at all hours, and the collective nostalgia for that “other” New York, historical or imaginary, that was less alienating than today.

“The king is here,” Steve mutters under his breath. It’s after 4 AM and

a guy has just walked in wearing a red and gold crown. His date wears a glimmering tiara. They are quickly followed by a group who says casually that they need seating for twenty-two people. Their waitress, already at work for eight hours, sighs audibly and leads them to the back.

Most weekends in May and June, just about every twenty-four-hour eatery in the area is full of high school students from Long Island and New Jersey partying after the prom. It is not uncommon for groups of prom-goers to rent limousines for the night and come into the “city” for nightclubs like the Copacabana. After 3 AM, the Skylight fills up with boisterous teenagers in wrinkled tuxedos and tight-fitting dresses.

Inevitably, limo drivers follow their charges into the diner and settle down at the counter to wait for the drive back to the suburbs. One such prom night, Louie sits at the counter. He’s a retired NYPD officer who now owns a fleet of limousines on Long Island. Though an owner, he says he still likes to drive the cars himself. He does, however, delegate the dayshift to his employees. “I love working at night,” he says with a thick Long Island accent. “I do all the nighttime jobs.” Louie says this is because it’s “quieter at night,” meaning less traffic. “And plus,” he says, “I get to see my kids during the day. When I get home my kids will be just getting up for school. I make breakfast, see them off to the school bus, go back and lay down until about 3 in the afternoon, and my day starts again. I love the nighttime. I love it.”

Louie is an exception to the typical labor arrangement of what Murray Melbin, in *Night as Frontier*, describes as “incessant organizations.” Outlining three historical schedules for labor and commerce, Melbin writes that the first, tied to agriculture, had a clear delineation between night and day. The second blurred the lines of morning and evening by requiring some activity before dawn or past sunset. Finally, the third schedule, where industries keep going all the time, is that of “incessance.”

Incessant organizations require special solutions to unique problems. This is particularly true in regard to staffing: they must have teams equipped with the right skills for specific functions and they must be replaceable due to high turnover. Thus the need for round-the-clock shift work. This is complicated, however, by status hierarchy and authority. Melbin suggests that since managers want to keep their elite status

position without sacrificing their sleep, they assign the nightshift to lower-level employees. One result of this is that if anything goes wrong at night, those with the power to make decisions are often not on site to handle the problem.

Though he owns the business, Louie prefers to work nights. He enjoys the flexibility nightshifts provide, and the time with his family during the day. But his status as the owner is intact: he has the power to choose his shift.

As an employee, Steve also prefers the nightshift, though for different reasons. The lack of oversight provides a certain amount of freedom and just enough responsibility without the burden of actually running the business. His experience is not uncommon; nights often afford opportunities to people who lack education, language skills, or other forms of social capital. This is especially attractive to those who may be socially or politically invisible, by choice or circumstance. These can be immigrants, other minorities, women, or anyone without seniority.

This invisibility creates a bond among those who work nights. Social status markers recede with the daylight. People move more slowly, respond more kindly to strangers. On the nightshift, even in New York City, a man who owns a limo company will take the time to chat with a man who manages a diner. They both seek lucid conversation and both have time to spare.

Louie runs out to the twenty-four-hour florist to buy roses for his wife and returns saying that this is one of his last trips. He is selling most of his fleet and leaving New York, moving to North Carolina next month. He explains how some of his Long Island neighbors discovered a planned community near Charlotte, North Carolina. He figures that he can make twice what he earns in New York and live at half the cost there. After forty years in New York, Louie is selling out: "Really," he says, "I mean, yeah, it's a beautiful city, it never sleeps, it's wonderful. But between the crime, the taxes," he trails off. "If you have any real estate in New York," he says simply, "sell it."

Louie ends his pitch as Steve walks over. "You don't know me, right?" Steve asks Louie. "I could tell you a story right now, and you're gonna call me a moron." Steve tells Louie about his father's cousin, who owns

a diner in Maryland but wants to retire in Greece. “Listen,” Steve begins, impersonating his father’s Greek cousin, “I had a son your age, he died in a car accident a couple of years ago. I’ve got a daughter, she lives in Atlanta and she doesn’t want to bother with a diner. I’ll make a deal with you. I’m 72 years old. You come down here, you send me \$3,000 a month, and I go to Greece. And the place is yours.” Steve waits, leans over the counter for effect, and adds, “But I’m still here.”

Louie hesitates a moment, and then obediently cries, “You’re a moron!”

Steve smiles and says, “What did I tell you?”

It’s after midnight at the North Shore Diner in Queens, and Steve is on his second Corona with lime. It’s June, and it’s hot. It’s also baseball season, so Steve wears his Yankees pinstripes tonight—number 25, Giambi—with a pair of baggy jeans. His oversized frame is wedged into a small seat at a four-top table in the center of the pastel dining room, but he could not look more comfortable. Completely at ease, Steve’s is a commanding presence in the room.

Dominating the intersection of Northern and Francis Lewis boulevards in Queens, the North Shore is one of only a handful of twenty-four-hour diners in the borough. But it is aptly named: Gutman points out that Long Island was once known as “diner island” for the countless all-night eateries that lined its northern and southern shores. But as with many regions of the Northeast, the old diners could not compete with the fast-food chains that came with increasing urban sprawl. When Greek immigrants breathed new life into the industry in the 1970s, the diner reappeared with a distinctly Mediterranean aesthetic. With its pastel accents and decorative arches, the North Shore is a monument to that influence.

“Greeks do two things,” Steve explains. “It’s either diners or construction.”

A waiter brings Steve another beer. He is short, stocky, Latino. Steve smiles and says, “Thanks, *mi amor*.” He says he picked up Spanish in the diner business. It’s his life. He explains, “80 percent of the diners, I know somebody. Even in the city.”

The “city” is Manhattan, more than an hour away by bus and subway. And at this time of night, the bus passes only every hour or so. This is Steve’s night off from the Skylight, and he is spending it here with old friends. He comes back to visit every now and again, maintaining his connections to the various diners throughout the city.

“It’s like a big fraternity,” Steve continues. “One person knows the other, and when one person leaves from here they could end up in Manhattan or somewhere else. It’s really good money, if you know what you’re doing. That’s what gets you stuck in this business. That’s what got me stuck. I planned on doing this like a year or two.”

Steve has worked in a diner since he was 12 years old. His mother, who first emigrated from Greece in the late 1970s, got him started as a busboy at the Lantern Diner in Hempstead on Long Island, where she was a waitress. Five years later, in 1996, he got a job as a waiter at the North Shore. For the next nine years he would wait tables and manage the North Shore Diner, almost always on the nightshift.

“You do this for a year, you’ll get used to it,” he explains. “When I was working days, I couldn’t sleep at night because it was too quiet. I couldn’t sleep. I was used to the trucks passing by and my mother talking on the phone, that’s what puts me to sleep. Sometimes, when I worked days, I used to sleep with the TV, because I couldn’t go to sleep without any noise. I know it sounds crazy, but I guess I got used to it.”

At 27, Steve finds it easier to work the nightshift and still have something of a social life, including a girlfriend he met at the North Shore. She is ten years his junior and worked as a hostess on the dayshift. “We’ve been doing this for two years, so we’re used to it. She does her things, I do my things, and we see each other. We talk on the phone all the time. Sometimes I’ll go the whole day without sleeping because I spent the day with her.” When he was younger, he could string out several days and nights in a row. “I would get off work at 7 in the morning and go have beers until 1 or 2 with guys from here. Go home, shower, and back to work at 5. But I was 17 at the time. If I do that now, I would pass out. When I was 17, though, I could do that for five or six days in a row.”

But even Steve admits he has few social connections beyond the diner. “I don’t hang out in my neighborhood,” he says after he returns from a

cigarette break. “I’ve lived there for seventeen years and the only time I’m there is when I’m sleeping.” Not long ago, a coworker from the North Shore passed away. He was 42 years old. “I cried harder at his funeral than I did for my grandmother, my grandfather,” explains Steve. “I used to spend sixty hours a week with this guy, and ten hours with my girlfriend. That’s why it hit us so hard when he passed away. We’re one big family.”

That family lives exclusively on the nightshift. Steve makes a clear distinction between those who work during the day and his coworkers at night. “People who work the nights are more easygoing. People who work in the day usually have kids, they’re serious.” As a night manager at the North Shore, Steve worked a fourteen-hour shift that overlapped with the dayshift for four hours during the dinner rush. For those four hours, Steve says he would hardly speak to his dayshift coworkers. He knew his girlfriend for a year and a half before they even spoke. “She was one of the daytime people,” he says with some disdain.

Diners are not the only place where tension exists between dayshift and nightshift employees. Nurses, train conductors, deli owners, and numerous other nightshift workers draw sharp distinctions between dayshift workers and themselves. As Steve says, “This is a secret that nobody talks about, the daytime people don’t like the nighttime people, and the nighttime people don’t like the daytime people. Any diner you go to, there’s like a feud going on. If something goes wrong, and it’s daytime, the daytime will automatically blame the nighttime people. Every diner you go to, it’s the same way.”

Beyond the tensions between dayshift and nightshift workers in the same job, there is also the tension between the dayshift city and those who work at night. From seemingly benign city ordinances about noise levels after dark to more concerted efforts to remove sex workers from the streets, the night has not shaken its image as dark and dangerous, as a place where anything can happen.

Steve’s “old diner” is one such place where violence tends to break out at night. They were in the newspaper six times, Steve says, for fights that turned violent. “Manhattan is not as rowdy as they are out here. Out here, I’ve had fights break out with people who came together.” Then he

gets on a roll, telling stories about all the fights he's witnessed—and often had to break up—in the diner. “That’s why they liked me as a night manager,” he says, “because I’m big.”

Steve says that the fights are why so many diners have security cameras. “If you’re twenty-four hours, you gotta have them.” The cameras are there, he explains, “not because of robberies, this place has been robbed once in twenty-five years.” The cameras are there for the fights. Steve elaborates: “One night we had a fight with like thirty people. And they broke so many fucking dishes we had to get them on camera to know who they were.” It turns out that they were regulars. “Next time they came in, they wound up paying like \$800 for all the damage.”

Late-night brawls aside, Steve actually prefers dealing with people on the nightshift. “Because in the daytime you got people who are not drunk, but they’re old and pains in the ass. They’ll send you back ten times if one thing is wrong. Drunks don’t give a fuck, whatever you serve them, they’ll eat it.” Steve has learned a lot about handling the various customers who come to a diner after midnight. This extends, apparently, to an easy generalization of ethnic groups and the individual customers who represent them. “You’ve gotta have a different way to talk to the blacks, a different way to talk to the Greeks, different way to talk to the Irish, to the Spanish. You learn from experience. I just picked it up along the way.”

Steve finishes his beer just as John, the night manager, stops by the table to say hello. He is middle-aged with thinning jet black hair combed straight back. He is slight of frame, dwarfed by Steve, though he carries a compact potbelly. The two chat in Greek for a while as John shows off some photographs of a Greek soccer team that came into the diner not long ago after a local game. John smiles and musters a few words in English, but he is obviously more comfortable in Greek, even after twenty years in New York.

Working the nightshift for the past decade, Steve has fewer opportunities to chat with coworkers in Greek. “Ten years ago it was 90 percent Greek,” he explains, “now it’s all Spanish. I have no idea where the Greeks went.” According to Steve, when his mother started in the business, there were no Latinos working the diners as waiters or cooks. Even

as late as 1996, when Steve started at the North Shore, there were four nightshift waiters, all Greek. “Now, there’s five waiters at night,” says Steve. Then, pointing at a middle-aged waiter who could be John’s twin, same slight frame, same thinning, jet black hair combed straight back, “This guy Jimmy, he’s the only Greek. And he’s the guy that took my spot. So before that, I was the only Greek at night.”

On the dayshift, the distinct evolution from Greek to Latino is not as clear. “In the daytime, the cooks are Mexicans, but not the waiters. The waiters are all different. There are some people from Europe.” Steve takes another swig from his Corona. “I don’t know why, but the last two years there are a lot of Polish girls starting to work in diners.” But on the nightshift, Steve witnessed the transformation firsthand and even helped it along. “In this place,” he explains, “I taught two Mexicans and a Salvadoran how to be waiters. They were busboys.”

According to Steve, most of the nightshift laborers in the kitchens are undocumented Mexican immigrants. And he has witnessed the transience of undocumented migrants as they move back and forth across the border, maintaining economic and social ties in Mexico and New York. Like the economy, the twenty-four-hour diner workforce is in constant flux, requiring a constant supply of labor to keep the doors open. Since the nightshift is often an entry-level job for low-wage workers, it is increasingly staffed by immigrant workers in much the same way unskilled jobs were a century ago. For recent immigrants from Latin America working the nightshift, this is literally another *frontera*, or border, they have to cross. Once they have left behind wives and husbands, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, and all other reminders of home, it is not much of a stretch to leave behind the familiar schedule of working days and sleeping nights.

Over the years, Steve has picked up a functional amount of Spanish language to manage the influx of immigrant labor, along with a self-conscious racism that older immigrants often feel toward newcomers. Typically, these ideas begin with some variation on “I’m not racist, but . . .” As Steve says, “I’m not racist, because I love Mexicans and blacks just as much as whites, but Mexicans are stupid. Because they’ll make \$100 and go drink it. Or they’ll blow it.” Interestingly, Steve

himself suggests this stereotype may be less about ethnicity or nationality and more about nightshift labor in diners, Greek or Mexican. Steve confesses, "I'm the same way, though, but Greeks are not like that. Typical Greeks. They save their money. They do not spend money. I'm like a mix of Mexican and Greek. Because I live the Mexican kind of life, but I'm Greek."

John gathers up his photos, pointing at one of him and the Greek soccer team with pride. Before he heads back to the small counter by the front door, he says in halting English, "Twenty years at night. The daytime, I don't like. I want a good life with my kids." He smiles and adds, "The boss wants someone to trust at night."

Billy, John's brother, owns the North Shore along with two other diners in Queens, and will not have anyone but family overseeing his business. "Billy, the owner, he's never here at nights," Steve says. "This place makes a lot of money, and you can't trust anybody. I'm the only person he used to trust in this place that's not family." That didn't stop Steve from quitting three times to work other diners, one in East New York, Brooklyn, and one just down the street in Queens. Now, as night manager of the Skylight in Manhattan, he is making good money and is less inclined to return. Billy, however, still wants him back. "He says to me, 'Forget about the *malakias* and come back.' That's what the Greeks say, the *malakias*, the bullshit."

Steve would sooner take up his father's cousin's offer to run the diner in Maryland than come back to the North Shore. But as he told Louie back at the Skylight, "I'm still here." When asked why, Steve says, "Honestly, I'm afraid to leave New York. I grew up here. I know where I can get anything at 4 in the morning. Out there, my cousin was telling me, at 9 everything is closed. Everything. You can't even get cigarettes after 9, which is, like, nuts. It reminds me of my father's island in Greece. You have to drive a half hour just to get cigarettes."

Steve leans in close and adds, "I mean, I know there is crime here and all that, but still I grew up here. I've been here twenty years. It's not easy to leave. Even though I've got a gold mine waiting there for me, which sounds crazy, but . . ."

It's just after midnight at the Skylight and Steve has taken his second delivery order in a row for matzo ball soup. "It's normal people now," he says. "After 11 it's all drunk people."

Baseball season ended last month, and the first cold blasts of winter are moving across Manhattan. Steve has settled into his position at the Skylight after a few more months and is less and less likely to return to the North Shore Diner in Queens. He recently broke up with his dayshift girlfriend and, improbably, seems to have put on a few more pounds.

Two women in their midtwenties prance into the diner. Steve takes notice. They giggle as they walk, wobbling a bit on their high heels, but there is a world-weariness about them suggesting they have not just come from the Copacabana. The hostess seats them at a table by the window.

"Why doesn't anyone sit at my counter?" he asks no one in particular. "I got two seats right here."

As if on cue, a mother and daughter push through the front door. The girl, no more than 8 years old, is wide-eyed and a little giddy. The mother directs her to the two seats at the counter, and coaches her through the enormous menu. Apparently it is the girl's first diner.

"The great thing about a diner," the mother explains, "is that you can get anything in the world."

The phone rings.

"Skylight," Steve says, a bit wearily. He jots a few items on a pad, then turns to a waitress.

"What do you charge for a banana?"

"75 cents," she replies, robotically.

"75 cents?" Steve says, dismayed. "What is this, a deli? Charge two dollars."

Steve hangs up the phone and calls the order in to the kitchen. He uncorks a bottle of Chardonnay and pours it into a paper cup for the delivery order. He takes in the low hum of the diner, the smattering of customers in the booths, and the mother and daughter still deciding on a midnight snack. He remembers why he likes the nightshift.

"The boss isn't here, standing over you, watching what you're doing,"

he says. Then he turns to the waitress. “We should just leave. We’ll lock the door and go home.”

He laughs quietly, mostly to himself, and asks, “Where is the key to the door?”

She answers, deadpan, “I don’t think they have one.”