
THE FEATURES PAGE

ADAIR LARA

Just call me Ms. Manners

EIGHT OF US, all women, sat around a table in a downtown hotel telling the others what had compelled us to take five busy midweek hours to study the uses of a spoon.

I assured myself that I was taking the etiquette class in order to make fun of it, but there was something about the way I leaned forward eagerly at the table, dressed in my best suit in order to impress the teacher, that told me different.

I realized that I didn't even know whether women, too, were supposed to stand when being introduced. Do we remain prettily seated, reaching a dainty wrist upward, or jump to our feet like the menfolk?

Most of the others were businesswomen whose jobs kept them meeting people at social events. My own job requires me to know when to make the all important shift from cornflake-strewn PJs to a stunning fleece sweatshirt, but I do sometimes have to put on something dry-cleaned and pin on a name tag and — where does that name tag go, exactly? (I remember my friend Isadora getting the placement wrong, and being asked, “And what do you call the other one?”)

Class began early, with hours of slides and instructions, during which we learned how to extend a business card to a Japanese businessman with two hands and how to put your name tag high on your right shoulder, and that women *always* stand to be introduced. Then lunch was served, and we were allowed to test our new skills on pumpkin soup and roast chicken.

BY THEN WE'D been there since 8:30, had already wolfed the breath mints and tiny square of chocolate we'd found at our places, and we were ready to fall on real food like wolves, two arms

around the plate and a throaty growl for anyone who came near.

Instead we kept our eyes on the host, Syndi Seid, knowing not to so much as touch our napkins until she did. We were 12 jockeys with our eyes on the starter gun.

Once freed to place our napkins in our laps (fold toward us), we took careful sips of the delicious soup, spooning away from ourselves, filling the bowl of the spoon only seven-eighths, trying not to scrape the soup bowl.

I had started eating my soup at my usual cartoon speed, with air marks to show the spoon going up and down, up and down, but a glance from a seat mate brought me up short, and I left two spoonfuls at the bottom of the bowl until, eventually, the rest of the table caught up with me.

Of course it was strange, in the world as it is today, sitting there on such a seemingly superficial quest, listening intently to how you must never let your used silverware touch the tablecloth. Outside this quiet hotel dining room was a world tense with fear. A friend had broken a lunch date rather than cross the Bay Bridge, sales of guns have tripled, there's talk of citizen IDs.

In this room the only fear was of seizing your neighbor's crusty bread roll by mistake or forgetting to keep the blade of your knife turned toward the inside, lest the temptation to stab your neighbor rattling on about her roses became too great.

It was strange, but it was also comforting: Manners are just part of the group of agreed-on behaviors we call civilization, part of the light we use to keep back the darkness.

AT DINNER THAT night I repaid Bill for a delicious steak, rice and green beans with a steady stream of admonitions:

Keep your elbows down. Put your utensils pointing at 10 o'clock and 4 o'clock to signal you're done. Don't send your food back if you are the guest at a lunch.

He was grateful, I think, though for some reason he didn't say so. Maybe a polite note, handwritten with a fountain pen, is coming in the mail.