I’m sick of Cinderella parts, of wearing rags and tatters.
I want to wear smart clothes and play the lover.
Mary Pickford, actress, producer

“You two,” said the girl with the tomato-colored hair when they straggled in to Ringa’s at the end of the day. “Want to make some dough?”

“Yes!” said Millie.

“Doing what?” asked Irene. This girl—Louise or Lorraine, Irene couldn’t remember which—was often out at night, probably working at that dance hall.

“Don’t worry, it won’t get you locked up on morality charges.” The girl had obviously seen Irene’s skepticism. “It’s just serving drinks and tiny little sandwiches to rich people.”

As it turned out Louise (not Lorraine) worked for a catering company. “We did a garden party yesterday at Cecil B. DeMille’s house—you’ve heard of him, right? The big director? A spread like you wouldn’t believe. At the end of the day when all the guests leave, Mrs. DeMille gets her knickers in a knot about how much food is left over, what a waste it is, all those starlets refusing even a nibble. Makes us all sit down and eat—which is against company rules, of course. But what could the manager do, it’s all on her nickel, right?”
The crew had hungrily eaten every morsel, and Louise had only been disappointed that the plate of egg salad sandwiches had been practically licked clean by the time she saw it. “Egg salad’s my favorite, and these had all the crusts cut off. Like the bread wasn’t soft enough already, you had to get rid of anything that wouldn’t melt in your mouth like cotton candy.”

As it turned out it had been a lucky thing the others had been so greedy. Sitting on a sunny table all afternoon, the sandwiches had gone bad. “They’re all puking their guts up right about now,” she said with a cruel little smile. “Serves ‘em right.”

The pay was four dollars for the evening and that was all Irene and Millie needed to hear. “Do you need men, too?” asked Millie.

“The owner’s so desperate for bodies,” said Louise, “at this point I think he’d take any stray dog that could stand on its hind legs and hold a tray of drinks.”

Two hours later, just as the truck pulled up to the curb, Henry jogged up the street. He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. “I got your note,” he panted. “Where’s the party?”

Louise eyed him appreciably. “They never say whose house,” she said, “so we can’t gab about it to crashers. But don’t worry, buster, it’ll be worth your while.”

Practically licking her chops, thought Irene, her dislike of the redhead suddenly blooming like algae.

They piled into the truck, which was already loaded with five young women and two men whom they could barely see in the scant light from two small windows in the doors. The airless truck cabin, fitted with benches along the walls, rattled along, uniforms swinging back and forth on a pole that spanned the width of the truck. Louise smiled slyly at Henry. “You’ll need the tallest set,”
she said. “Wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable in any important areas.”

To his credit, Henry gave her a withering look, and said simply, “Thanks for the tip.”

The truck turned up a winding road and finally came to a hard stop. A moment later, the back doors flew open. “Out, out, quickly please,” instructed a thin man with an even thinner mustache.

“The manager,” whispered Louise. “We call him Kaiser behind his back.”

Another truck had pulled up and emptied out, and they were about twenty waiters and waitresses in all. The Kaiser, back straight as a ship’s mast, waited for absolute silence.

“The women will dress in one truck, the men in another,” he instructed as his assistant handed out uniforms. “You will each be given a tray from which you will serve beverages. When the tray is empty, you will retrieve any discarded glasses from your immediate area and return them to the kitchen where you will be given more full glasses. Some of you will be stationary, some will be roving. I will decide who does what, so do not ask for a particular assignment. I know several of you are with us only temporarily, and so I will impress upon you the most important rule of the evening. You may not speak to the guests. If you are spoken to, you may answer only with the fewest words necessary for a courteous response. You will not gawk, you may not even seem to notice the guests. You are statuary, moving only to provide service. Anyone interacting with or even looking particularly closely at guests will be immediately escorted from the premises and left to return home on foot.”

The uniforms were made of scratchy black material—ill-fitting black suits for the men, calf-length dresses for the women, with white aprons and ruffled caps they bobby-pinned
into their hair. “Ugly,” murmured Millie, “so we don’t look prettier than the guests.”

Irene hadn’t thought of that, but as she glanced around, she saw Millie’s point. Every waitress was quite lovely, and could likely give the invited women a run for their money in the looks department. Some were even more beautiful than Millie. And they’re all prettier than I am.

“Actress?” she asked a stunning brunette with wide green eyes standing next to her.

“Hope so!” beamed the girl. “I mean, we’re all hoping, aren’t we?”

Their trays were loaded with impossibly tall, thin glasses of champagne—So much for Prohibition, thought Irene—and each server was aimed out the swinging kitchen door and down a hallway to the party beyond.

“Oh, my!” gasped Millie.

Henry, fast on her heels, murmured, “Boy oh boy.”

Irene stepped into the room and immediately understood. It was overwhelming.

Her eyes caught first on the massive dangling crystal chandelier, the size of and shape of a Christmas tree, tier upon tier glistening in the soft glow of dozens of tiny incandescent bulbs. It hung from a ceiling painted sky blue, dusted with frothy clouds about which fat cherubs cavorted. Floor-to-ceiling windows shimmered with swirling gilded grilles, illuminated from behind by outdoor lighting; the walls echoed these patterns in gold embossed wallpaper. The floor was a grand mosaic of gold, blue, and green in a radiating compass design.

Even more glittering were the women, in floor-length shimmering satin gowns or short swinging dresses strung with fringe
or rivulets of sequins. They idly fingered dangling ropes of pearls or flashing jewels and glowed like lanterns against the night sky of tuxedoed men.

“No gawking,” hissed Louise from behind. “Kaiser’ll can you on the spot.”

Irene’s station was beside the banquet table, and she glided surreptitiously across the room to stand at attention beside the vast landscape of food, eyes trained on the middle space between the swirls of color and chatter.

“What on earth?” A woman suddenly giggled a few feet away. “This does not look edible.”

“It’s squid, darling.” A man’s voice.

“Good Lord! We’re supposed to eat a monster of the deep like it’s just another ham sandwich?”

“Actually, it’s not just another ham sandwich, which is entirely the point. Have another drink, darling, and it’ll all make sense.”

Gold bangles on the woman’s long thin arm clinked against the glasses as she reached onto Irene’s tray. “Would you eat it? Squid, I mean,” she asked Irene.

What was the right answer? She would if she were hungry enough, which she certainly was, though it did look like rubber bands in clam sauce. And would such an answer be considered “interacting”? Without making eye contact, Irene said simply, “Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re lying! You look too normal to eat squid.”

“Leave the poor girl alone. Come now, let’s find Irving and Norma.”

They drifted away, and Irene was left to wonder whether being “normal”-looking was a liability. On the way to the YMCA to leave the note for Henry, she and Millie had speculated that it might be an opportunity to meet important people at the studios. But it was becoming entirely evident that this was every
server’s hope, and the prospects were impossibly dim. These people barely noticed her. She was a ham sandwich; they were squid.

Millie was assigned to rove among the guests, murmuring one word and one word only: “Champagne?” This allowed her to take in one opulent room after another: the banquet hall with that huge chandelier; the music room where a ten-piece band played sparkling renditions of “Second Hand Rose” and “Saint Louis Blues,” as guests twirled across the parquet floor; the grand parlor with its potted palms, gilt-framed paintings, and silk upholstered furniture in mauves and grays. Her family socialized with the Springfield, Massachusetts, elite, but she’d never in her life seen anything as unabashedly ostentatious as this. “New money,” she could hear her mother say with disdain. And she’d have been right, thought Millie. It was spit-in-your-eye wealth.

As the evening wore on, the guests grew thirstier and their behavior responded accordingly. Out on the vast stone patio overlooking the pool, two couples smoking and howling with laughter beckoned her over.

“Come on now, ladies,” one of the fellows cackled, “give us those shoes.”

This sent one of the women into convulsive laughter that looked almost painful, while the other shook a limp finger at him and slurred, “Now tha’s not entirely ’propriate.”

“’Propriate, my ass, Dolores! Gimme the damn shoe!” commanded the other gentleman and held out his hand.

“Billy, Billy, Billy.” She shook her head, wobbling back and forth like it might come loose altogether. “You are no gentleman. You are a shoe-sniffer.”
Billy simply picked her up and threw her over his shoulder like a duffle of dirty laundry, pulled off one of her pink satin kitten-heel pumps, held it out to Millie, and said, “Pour.”

The other fellow erupted into gales of laughter, gasping “Shoe! Shoe!” at his date. She staggered around trying to lift her foot to her hand without falling over till he caught her by the waist. She handed up a shiny red patent leather pump, and both men watched with glee as Millie dutifully emptied two champagne glasses into the shoes, effectively ruining them.

They downed the booze in gulps, one man pouring a good bit of it down the front of his no-longer-crisp tuxedo shirt. Then they heaved the shoes into the pool while one woman clapped and staggered around on one heeled foot and one bare; the other seemed to have gone to sleep over her date’s shoulder. He turned to look at Millie, and said, “You’re still here?”

Henry, stationed out by the kidney-shaped pool, watched the shoes sail into the water and bob around like colorful little fishing buoys. The pool house had apparently been designated a vow-free zone; he’d seen the same portly gentleman with the same thick gold band on his ring finger go in and out with three different young women so far, each emerging with ruffled hair and smeared lipstick, adjusting a strap or tugging down a slip.

“Thank you, Mr. Wilmington,” the last one murmured. “I can expect to hear from your office tomorrow?” He dismissed her with a perfunctory smile and a pat on the bottom.

Afterward he stood a few feet away from Henry, lit a cigarette, gazed out across the pool to the cacophony of light and sound pulsing from the mansion, and shook his head. “Can’t stop.” Then he chuckled. “But why should I?”
By three in the morning, most of the guests had either left or been discreetly removed by the house staff to the warren of bedrooms on the second floor. By four, all the glassware had been collected, and Kaiser was orchestrating the retreat of the kitchen staff.

Irene straightened her aching back and approached him to ask if they might be placed on a list for when he needed extra servers. “After a night like tonight? I saw more chatter with guests than I’ve ever seen in my entire career! And don’t think I didn’t notice some of you pocketing rolls and little sandwiches to take home.”

“But my friends and I . . . we didn’t—”

“I don’t know who it was. You all look the same. But none of you will be in my employ again, you can be certain of that.”

When the truck emptied them out at Ringa’s, the light was just starting to simmer below the horizon, the birds in the jacarandas warming up for the morning’s syncopated jazz performance.

“I’m not sure whether to get an hour of sleep or go find coffee somewhere and head straight to work,” said Henry. He bid them goodbye and headed off into the sunrise.

Irene and Millie tiptoed up the stairs. Louise had pocketed her four bucks and headed out with one of the other waiters who’d been demonstrably more taken by her attentions than Henry. The girl who shared her bed was missing, too, leaving Irene and Millie alone in the room.

“At least we made eight dollars,” said Millie, curling herself against Irene.

“I’m not sure if it was worth it. Even if I got offered a lead role tomorrow, I’d probably fall asleep midscene.”

“Did you see all those other girls?” Millie yawned. “So pretty.”

“And so many of them.”

The starlets with their sparkling outfits, the other waitresses
glowing like Clara Bow even in the ugly uniforms. Irene had known the competition would be stiff, but considering all the other parties likely going on across the town that night, with more starlets and more gorgeous serving girls angling for any toehold in the business, she wondered if it might be insurmountable.

Especially for a ham sandwich like her.