

# Orange Wings, Nylon Shorts, and Other Horrors.

written by Guest Contributor | March 27, 2017



With grey wooden walls and faded red roofing, Hooters stood in front of us not as a restaurant with questionable hiring practices, but as a torture chamber where villainy ran wild and unchecked. We were parked at the edge of the lot, giving onlookers more than enough time to gawk and stare at our walk of shame towards the entrance. My little sister Emily was the last one to step out of the car. She looked up and glared at the owl emblem resting above the front door, its large eyes crudely substituting the Os in the restaurant's name. Despite her silence, my mother and I could tell she was fuming, whereas my father, the middle-aged Caucasian man holding us hostage, was already holding the door open and waving us inside.

"C'mon, what are you guys waiting for? Pick up the speed a little."

The venue may have been brightly lit, full of loud laughter and booming music, but to me, it was no better than a boozy, back-alley bar where illicit activity, seedy transactions, and boorish behavior regularly transpired. Rolls of paper towels were perched upright atop wooden tables. Hoisted on the walls a few American flags, a couple neon beer signs, and several television screens airing football.

And white people.

Goddamn white people. Of all shapes and forms.

Grown men, inebriated and lonely, willing to waste their evenings listening to stale, old rock radio hits in exchange for eye candy and false companionship. A tribe of snickering teenagers. An elderly couple. Parents with young kids.

This was Hooters in all its glory, in all its splendor.

We were surrounded by multiple women parading around in signature Hooters attire: tight white tank tops and orange nylon shorts. It was as if the sirens from Greek mythology finally decided to grow legs, leave the vast oceans, and work in the food industry. From the looks of things, they were making a killing from people like him.

Our captor, ignorant of the trauma and torture he was inflicting upon us, shamelessly ogled women half his age while the rest of us sat dumbfounded and resigned to the misery and awkwardness awaiting us for the remainder of the evening.

After a four year stint as a private contractor, my father had finally returned home from Afghanistan during my senior year of high school. When we picked him up at the airport, it was all open arms and smiles, but later that night, my mother and him were arguing and yelling in their bedroom. She would yell, then he would yell, and eventually the yelling just merged together, indistinguishable from one another. My little sister, trained and self-taught in the art of espionage, decided to sneak up close to their door and listen in. I stayed in my room and flipped channels on the TV.

“Do you wanna know what they’re fighting about?” she asked, entering my room to report her findings.

My eyes still half-glued to the TV, I lowered the volume. “Not really. None of my business.”

Voice lowered, she said, “Are you glad he’s back?”

It was a question ringing in my head ever since my mother told us he would be arriving home early to work as an engineer at the nearby Mitsubishi plant. Afghanistan introduced him to the smell of burnt flesh and the sight of bloodied body parts. For years I was afraid of phone calls and the news they could potentially bring. One was made to our house between my mom and him while I was at school. While they were speaking, a loud volley of gunfire could be heard in the background. He was in a dangerous place, but the money was good and we needed it. Years ago, our neighbor had died overseas. He, along with three accompanying soldiers were riding into a town when an IED exploded underneath them. His daughters, five and six, were cheated out of a dad. My little sister Emily used to play with them on their driveway.

“I’m glad he’s *safe*,” I answered.

Emily nodded and left. Hours went by and when I walked out to grab some snacks from the kitchen, I saw my father exiting the bedroom with a pillow and sheet in hand. He had spent his first night home sleeping alone on our ugly, olive green couch.

It took a while for the family to readjust to his presence as my mother had slowly developed a more laid-back, apathetic approach to parenting in his absence. A pile of shoes amassed by the front door, and mismatched socks and jackets cluttered our living room couch, acts that would never go unnoticed under his watch. Emily and I were allowed to either roam free outside or stay holed up in our rooms. Either way, our mother could sit in the kitchen and watch her Korean soap-dramas without interruption. Long ago, we may have been close, but now we all had separate lives, largely unknown and independent from one another, just how I’d grown to prefer it.

When my father returned we were all expected to dine together as a family.

Dinner used to be a simple affair. Our mother would cook and prepare meals; we would take them back to our rooms to eat separately. Occasionally, we ate with her at the dining room table and had small talk, but it was always at our own volition. Now there were redundant rituals and unnecessary formalities to perform before dinner could commence. At my father's insistence, silverware had to be set neatly on the dining room table. Cursing was heavily censored. Prayers needed to be recited. Sharing details from our secret, separate lives was now strongly encouraged. Sunday was suddenly christened "Family Day," a weekly holiday with no planned activities, invented only to prevent us from spending the day with our friends. We were not receptive to these seemingly draconian bonding exercises; instead, we treated them as an abnormal interruption to the natural order of things.

He wasn't reentering our lives; he was trespassing.

We were subjected once again to our father's temper and tyrannical rules. Small acts pricked his skin: the unattended shoes by the front door, the naps taken by Emily and me during the day, the family leaning Democrat. Emily was chewed out for making herself a plate of Hot-Pockets shortly before dinner.

"Hot-Pockets before dinner?" my father yelled, a hint of desperation masked underneath his anger. "Don't you know we're eating in half an hour? We're supposed to eat together *as a family*."

"I just wanted a snack," my sister responded. "They're just Hot Pockets."

With our father permanently home, the heady, halcyon days of midnight-snacking and eating when and where we wanted disappeared. Family outings at restaurants replaced our individualistic eating habits and the menu items from the local Mexican place became forcibly integrated into our diets. Being his favorite, it was practically the only place we ever went. Each visit, he'd order himself a plate of shrimp nachos and a margarita, stopping by the neighboring beer and wine store afterwards to pick up a case or two of Guinness. Dining out used to be a rarity, but because of my father, we were frequently bringing home leftover boxes of enchiladas and refried beans.

"We're going out tonight" quickly became dreaded words at our house. Mom was growing worried about money. Emily and I were sick of eating at the same venue over and over again. Complaints were made, but never taken into serious consideration.

After countless enchiladas and burritos, my father surprised us all by suggesting a new restaurant: an eatery he and his coworkers had visited earlier in the week during their lunch.

"Kenneth, how do you feel about Hooters?" my father asked.

At this point, any prior knowledge I had on the restaurant was from an episode of *Undercover Boss* I had the misfortune of watching long ago. On my television screen, I watched as a woman stopped to explain why Hooters is degrading to a disguised CEO and a pair of waitresses. One of them, voice on the verge of breaking, stammered about not knowing what to think or feel.

Later, at the end of the day, the CEO asked the two if the woman's comments would ever lead to them quitting. The same waitress, having regained her composure, quickly replied matter-of-factly, "Not at all. At the end of the day, their husbands are still going to come in."

I knew Hooters was a miserable place where my mother and sister would hate the rowdy atmosphere and loud music. Whenever my mom took Emily and me somewhere to eat, it would be someplace quiet. An immigrant from South Korea, Mom was deeply insecure of her broken English and preferred to stay home. Dining out, going to school events, and even picking up groceries could spiral out of control for her. She'd be tense about the cashier not being able to understand her, preferring the automatic checkout lines. In drive-thru lines, she'd be enraged and depressed afterwards at having to repeat herself several times. The outside was still an unfamiliar, hostile place to her.

"When I go out, they treat me like I'm dumb and it hurts, it hurts, it hurts," she said, seated at the kitchen table, laptop in front of her, streaming the latest episode of a Korean drama she was binging. "Because it nervous me, I try to stay inside."

My mother chose to withdraw from the world whenever she could, but my sister was only a middle schooler and had to spend the majority of her days attending school, where she was vulnerable to ridicule and bullying. Being Asian was a mark of shame, an easy opportunity for her classmates to insult her. She would cry and show Instagram photos of models to my mother and ask, "Mom, is she prettier than me? Don't lie. Please, don't lie to me."

Hooters was a goddamn, awful idea.

But I knew my father was a lonely man. He told us once his English accent marked him as an outsider to his coworkers and friends as well. I think that's why he started listening to twangy country music in his truck, instead of U2, a band he's been following for over two decades. Something to talk about at work. Country music helped him blend in at work, but he was still a stranger to us. He had been gone for four years, unable to fully grasp the day-to-day worries his family faced. I feigned ignorance and told him that I didn't know anything about Hooters, confident that someone else would talk him down.

"You would like the wings a lot," he said, face brightening with hope.

Unwilling to hurt his feelings, I lied. "I, uhh, yeah, sure, whatever, I don't care."

I was absolutely convinced my mother, forever direct and to the point, and occasionally, just plain mean, would put a halt to his plans. During my tenth Christmas, after unwrapping the present Dad purchased for her, she looked at the sterling silver necklace and without pause, told him she didn't like it. No modifiers or half-ass excuses to cushioned the blow. Even on Christmas. She doesn't maim. No, she strikes to kill. If anyone was going to inform Dad that Hooters was off-the-table, it'd be her, which is why I was initially

shocked when, instead of outright shutting down the idea, she diplomatically suggested an Irish pub we could try out instead. I guess she saw how lonely he was, too.

Unwilling to compromise, my father continued campaigning Hooters' famous wings to us, convincing only himself that the food was to die for. Apparently Hooters was a culinary treasure trove and we were all being stubborn on the matter. When he realized we were not fully won over, he pulled out a nickel from his pocket, suggesting we settle it with a simple coin toss.

"I'm not flipping a coin," my mother said, hiding her frustration behind a forced smile while demonstrating superhuman restraint and unwarranted patience.

He nodded his head a few times before speaking, and for a brief moment, it appeared as if he was finally able to register our collective disinterest.

"Soooooooooooo... Hooters?"

Our waitress was a young woman with tanned skin and dark brown hair. I felt sorry for her. Apart from having to wear those hideous traffic-cone colored shorts, she was stuck serving us. My father's eyes were ogling her entire body, especially her large breasts. My sister stayed silent, speaking only to mumble her order. If my mother was mortified by being stuck in a sleazy, dirty den with the rest of us, she hid it well. Instead, every time our waitress came to our table, Mom produced a warm smile. The only clue to her possible discomfort was her excessive politeness, as a request to fill a glass of water would contain up to four to six uses of the word "please" and twice as many "thank you's." My mother had never been this polite.

It was scary.

Following my dad's lead, I ordered wings. People always mention the wings at Hooters, either praising or condemning them, but I'm still unable to pass judgement on the divisive menu item. My growing shame had washed out all the flavor. They tasted like pieces of driftwood marinated in embarrassment. My mother and sister both ordered salads, and between bites, my sister complained to Mom in Korean, a language my dad was unable to follow.

Arms crossed, slumped against the chair, my sister said, "He's only here for the boobs."

Lost in the bliss of what he considered a good meal, and uninterested in their secret banter, my father continued picking apart his wings like a vulture over a fresh carcass. What my mother said, beyond a few phrases, was mostly lost on me as well, but I could tell from her inflection she was trying to calm my sister down, possibly by making an excuse for my father's behavior. After all, the man had been away from his family in Afghanistan for several years. His homecoming had been met with apathy rather than enthusiasm. He experienced something resembling fun when visiting here with his coworkers and only wished to share the experience. The only flaw in his misguided plan was that the restaurant's appeal did not carry over, as we

were not a rowdy gang of horny, middle-aged men or adolescent boys who'd just endured puberty.

But my father wasn't dining with his coworkers. Instead, seated in wooden chairs with orange vinyl cushions, half-empty plates in front of them, were a daughter who was still sad and bitter about her dad missing five birthdays in a row since she was a third-grader; a woman who only stayed in America, a country absent of all her friends and family, because she felt an obligation to raise her son in what she was told was the best country ever; and a high school senior who was months away from graduating and ready to leave everyone and everything behind.

When the check came, my mother and sister declined to-go boxes. My father, still oblivious to the fact he had alienated his family, asked us if we enjoyed it. My sister ignored him and in an effort to spare his feelings, I lied and said it was okay.

"I'm sure you had fun with your friends earlier, but I rather we don't make any more plans to return," my mom said, delivering a gentle killing blow to his enthusiasm. "Too expensive."

He seemed rather disappointed that he'd failed to win us over with our latest family outing and, eventually, in the following weeks, he became further disillusioned, leaving us alone for the most part. After work, he'd retreat to the upstairs study, where he'd listen to various U2 tracks. The door would be half-closed, but from the bottom of the stairs, you could faintly hear Bono singing songs from *The Joshua Tree*. The rest of us stayed downstairs, climbing up only to let him know we were heading to bed.

When Christmas finally came around, he was the only one interested in purchasing a tree to decorate. He drove out one early Saturday morning and bought a real one from the lot down the outer edge of our neighborhood, placing it in the corner of our living room and filling our house with the smell of fresh pine and sticky sap. While we were all in our respective rooms, my father silently hung a string of Christmas lights around our tree. Shiny bulbs of assorted colors. Forgotten crafts made in elementary school. Old childhood photos. He pulled all of them out and meticulously arranged them onto this tree that no one else wanted. I think he was hoping one of us would eventually come out to help, but none of us ever did.

The first night back, after the fight with mom, my father and I exchanged glances in the living room. We didn't talk about why he was sleeping on the couch. We didn't talk about the yelling and fighting. We didn't talk about the past or the future, everything he missed, everything he might still be able to be a part of. My father was finally back home, but still stuck miles away from the rest of us.

**Featured Image Credit:** *Hooters* by Mike Mozart via [Flickr](#) (CC BY 2.0)

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