

America's Favorite Neighbor

Nidia Fevry

With pictures on the walls memorializing hometown heroes and local area history, Applebee's really wants the people of Leominster, Massachusetts to believe that it is serviceable during moments of glory as well as those of sadness. It is that neighbor that can always offer you a seat, a smile, and something tasty to eat when you go over. Applebee's is there for birthdays, Little League game receptions, family outings, and those many nights lacking entertainment. What this place offered me, however, was somewhere to practice an unhealthy addiction to photography.

How could I decline a suggestion from my newly made friends to go there? I had just moved to the area my junior year and was shocked at how much teenage cultures could vary across the state of Massachusetts. Waltham High School encouraged extracurricular interests and school-sponsored events such as sports and fine arts in the majority of its student body. My move to Leominster High, "The home of the devils," exposed me to a different culture that I had not even known existed. The noises that came with lunchtime on Mondays were overpowered by the many stories everyone had of their drunken weekends. For some, this conversation continued throughout the week: on Tuesdays, it would be of their drunken Mondays. These conversations would drown out the voices of the many who didn't have such stories to share. A night out at Applebee's, though, had no such expectations. Here everyone could feel comfortable; here they could release their stress, here all their inhibitions went away-at Applebee's, they could smile.

It is no surprise that I, an avid picture taker, would want to capture moments from this place. Maybe I took these pictures so that I could have something to bring to school the following day that would conjure up conversation. "You guys! Look at how cute these pictures

are!” might spark as much interest as “Guys, I got absolutely hammered this weekend.” People love looking at pictures of themselves, right? It would be worth a shot.

My wish to finally have pictures of my own was the root of my newly developed addiction. Albums of baby pictures, birthdays, and sports events are as common as children in most American homes. In my house, neither I nor my brother has one of these albums. Unfortunately all of our baby pictures went missing in Haiti. With this in mind, I was destined to always look like a tourist with a camera around my neck, waiting for any moment to press the big button. With my first job at CVS, I gained some adult responsibilities that I had been yearning for. I was now an established member of the working world. I could sigh and grunt when I heard someone talk about taxes and I was able to spend the hour's \$6.75 on anything I wanted. With a camera in one hand and film in the other, I was on a mission to capture as many memories as I could. Everything was given the opportunity to be photographed; I did not discriminate. I felt that since I had been robbed of the ability to look back at childhood memories, I was going to tend to my own teenage ones. I took pictures on trips; I arranged everyone for the group shots; I made sure to take a snapshot of myself if I was dressed especially well that day-these pictures would be my fountain of youth.

My archives consist of many pictures in which Applebee's served as a backdrop. There my shutter has captured birthdays, post-show celebrations, and graduation, as well as many other random moments. There I brought my new power of freezing time. One shot shows my two best friends and me out celebrating Ashley's 17th birthday at our “neighbors.” Why, one might ask, that of all the pictures sitting in my photo albums, does this particular one stand out to me? In this picture taken at Applebee's, something is out of place. All the visual tokens of the restaurant are present: the bright colors, warm setting, and playful art. The other promises of bringing

people together and providing a space for special occasions are there, too. Missing is one particular smile that the restaurant's advertisers made us believe would *always* be there.

Was the service bad that day? Did Applebee's lose its glamor? None of these speculations account for the half-hearted smile of one of the subjects. The wait staff was as friendly as they had always been and the restaurant still wanted to lend a comforting hand. Blake was just posing for the picture, trying to force a smile in this place where he felt obliged to and for the Canon encouraging him on. Luckily for the advertisers, Blake would later prove that the restaurant was not accountable for his contorted smile; it was not because they defied their promises to bring happiness to Leominster. Luckily for the advertisers, they could stand by their motto now revised: except for special exceptions, Applebee's made everyone smile.

Exactly one month and twenty-four days after I processed this picture in my little piece of heaven at CVS, we were all shocked by news that Blake had committed suicide. This was especially surprising to those of us who thought we were his best friends and knew everything about him, namely Ashley and me. We knew him as the kid that could blind you with his bright smile, kiss you on the forehead if you were unhappy, and think up afternoon activities that could bring out anyone's inner child. My bedroom walls are covered with photographs of such activities. Obsessions with capturing these kinds of moments made Blake feel as if he had to fake it. We all bought it. His whole existence was a pose for the many photographers in his life.

Not even Applebee's could save Blake. *There, everyone could feel comfortable, there, they could release their stress, there is where all their inhibitions went away-at Applebee's they could smile.* Yet, in this particular picture, Blake defied the rules. He had been betraying the camera all along and his lies were consequently caught and exposed by the Canon. He lied about loving life; he lied with every smile and chuckle; he lied with every suggestion to go get ice-

cream or go to Cherry Hill to sled. Blake was a pleaser and just wanted to make everyone happy. He was a good son, and good friend that would smile for the photographer every time he heard the word "Cheese!" What else was there to do in life? We just wanted a good picture. We just wanted something to put up on our bedroom walls, something for the photo albums and something for the slideshow for the upcoming year's graduation party.

Since this picture was taken a year ago, I look at it with a new attitude. While I remember the day, I do not actually remember the picture being taken or who it was taken by. I do not remember Ashley putting on his sunglasses or who was on the other end of the cell phone that Blake was holding. What this picture offered to me after Blake's death was something to study that could, maybe, give me some answers. Why did I not notice the fake smile before? Why didn't I notice how he tried so hard to seem happy? There was something wrong and a closer study of the picture revealed to me something that I had missed before.

After the picture whispered Blake's fake intentions, I stopped being addicted to photography. Perhaps if I had not been so caught up in having the picture taken, I could have studied his face in person instead of trying to do so looking through the little hole in the back. Maybe I could have caused the Applebee's effect to kick in that day, instead of trying to generate it through my shutters. Maybe those couple of minutes it took to organize the picture could have been spent reading his eyes and interpreting his smile. Instead, I chose to ask someone to take a picture, so I could have the moment last forever. I took pictures of the present to look at later. I was delayed Blake, I'm sorry. I was late in looking at the present. But no worries -I will always have the picture and everyone will know that it was taken at Applebee's.

All in all, we need to spend more time enjoying things such as the Applebee's effect in Leominster, Mass., rather than trying to capture it. Look closely enough at a picture and you can

tell if someone is posing. Look closely enough at someone in real life and if you study really hard, you might be able to read the genuineness of their countenance.