My family and I have one Italian restaurant that we absolutely adore called Vaso’s. The waitstaff knows us and our orders even to the point where they decide themselves whether or not it’s worth telling us what the specials are. My father, who always orders the same stuffed veal special, only has to ask, “So, ya’ll got it tonight?” and every waiter knows exactly what he’s talking about.

Owned by Greek immigrants and staffed by people from all different parts of Latin America, the restaurant feels like a representative slice of life in today’s United States. The place is tiny, housed in what used to be an old BBQ shack. As part of my hometown’s historical buildings initiative, the owners of the restaurant were required to leave the old Dixie Bones neon sign up. The sign is not only misleading but also reminds those who visit of this town’s past. Typically, as you go farther north in Virginia, the visuals of Confederate flags, Robert E. Lee statues, and other relics of “Southern Pride” begin to dissipate. However, in the historic city of Alexandria, these things still stand, protected by the people’s dedication to “keep history alive.”

At Vaso’s, it is absolutely required that you make a reservation. When you walk inside, there are just five small booths lined up against the right wall and a smattering of café-like tables to the left with a small, square bar in the back corner where the alcohol, register, utensils, and everything else not housed in the kitchen lives. Due to its popularity and miniscule capacity, our family has always called the restaurant and reserved a table at least three days in advance of when we planned on eating there. This ceremony made the dinner something that we all looked forward to after the call was placed.

The last time we went to Vaso’s was to celebrate a number of noteworthy updates. My brother had gotten into the college of his dreams, I had gotten into grad school, and it was right around my mother’s and my aunt’s birthdays. Unfortunately, my father was working a late shift at the hospital that night and couldn’t join us. Although his absence was felt for a number of reasons I’ll get into later, this was a dinner we were all excited for. For days we’d been dreaming about heaping bowls of al dente spaghetti smothered in meat sauce and plates filled with pita, hummus, tzatziki, and olives.

Upon arriving, we found the restaurant was, as always, packed. A Hispanic man with spiky, gelled up hair and a big smile on his face made his way towards us. He’d been working there for years and had immediately recognized my family. After wiggling past other waiters and narrowly avoiding a collision with a busboy, he made it to where we were standing. Immediately noticing that the tall white guy who usually accompanied us was absent, he asked, “Where’s Dad?” We chuckled and told him he was working late. He gave a sympathetic shrug then told us that he’d have us seated as soon as one of the booths cleared out, pointing to one right over his shoulder. So, we awkwardly stood in the doorway, trying not to look right at the table we were promised and staying out of the way of patrons and waitstaff.

After about 15 minutes, the family at our table started getting up and the staff swooped in to start cleaning. Just as the busboy moved away from the booth to take his first bucket of dishes away, a group of four older men and women came through the door behind us. Dressed to the nines in crisp polos, sweaters, and khakis, they walked in as if they owned the place. Practically running us over, they pushed their way into the restaurant. Without stopping, they gave our
brown family a once over, pushed past us, and all sat down at the not yet cleared table. The spiky
haired waiter looked at the table, gave us a quizzical look, then walked over to the group of
people who had since made themselves quite comfortable.
Due to the hubbub in the restaurant, we couldn’t hear what was being said but only saw
fingers pointed at the waiter and heads being shook. The waiter, looking wounded, walked back
to us and told us that the group that had taken our table refused to get up, even once informed
that the table belonged to us. A little frustrated, but wanting to take the higher ground, we said it
was all ok and thanked the waiter for confronting the patrons in the first place.
We were eventually seated in another booth and, feeling humiliated, spent our dinner
trying to fathom why this group of people felt that they were entitled to whatever they wanted.
One theory came up again and again as we sat picking at the food we had initially planned on
demolishing. “Is it because Dad isn’t with us?” My meat sauce congealed and grew cold as we
tried to express the injustice we felt to one another. My mother who had become accustomed to
such treatment after decades of maltreatment from my father’s white, Southern parents, told us
we should just brush it off and enjoy our meals. My aunt, whose fury was only being contained
for our sakes, spoke in a harsh whisper. “Why did they deserve to sit wherever they wanted?”
“Why didn’t they need reservations?” “Why did they feel that they could tell an employee that
the rules of his establishment were meaningless?” “Do they do this at every restaurant they
attend?” We were all beginning to think not.
The waiter cleared our dinner plates and asked if we’d like to see the dessert menu. What
would have typically been a resounding yes became a murmured “No, we’re too full.” My
mother quickly paid the bill and we made our way for the door. Hearing insanely loud laughter, I
looked over my shoulder. The group that had taken our table was guffawing, throwing their
heads back without a care in the world, surrounded by at least two empty wine glasses each.
Frustrated, I turned around and walked out the door with my family.
It was dark outside now, and, looking down at the black pavement, I could see the neon
reflection of the Dixie Bones BBQ sign overhead. What once felt like just a chubby pig
humorously misplaced over an Italian restaurant now felt more oppressing and foreign than ever.
It was no longer an amusing relic, but an active symbol. It reminded me where I was and what
some people who lived here saw me as. In the town I grew up in, I was not welcomed or
respected by all. My presence and my interests were only validated if my white father was by my
side. Even in spaces like Vaso’s, made possible by the beautiful diversity of this country, white
people still held the power.