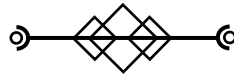


Keeping Tabs

You'll have what they're having

I haven't even finished opening, but he's already there. My first customer of the night walks in wearing an impeccably tailored suit. I notice that his hat, the same shade of grey as the suit, is tipped over his eyes before he casually hangs it on a hook by the door. I didn't even know that hook existed, but now it seems like the establishment was built around it. Strolling confidently to the bar, his eyes scanning every detail, he unabashedly eyes my waitress, who seems to melt at his smile. When he speaks, the entire room stops to listen, and I even forget that he's drinking while any normal person would be at work. When he orders his drink, I think it's the perfect description of him; he definitely belongs in a simpler time. He lights up a cigarette, and the flame flickers over his face, highlighting his thoughtful gaze at something no one else can see. "It's Toasted," he says, indicating the cigarette, and smiles wistfully.

I observe him as he takes meetings, ordering whiskeys for men like him, and martinis for women wearing jewels and furs. At some point, he even asks to use the bar phone to call his wife (I didn't even know we had a bar phone, and I can't believe he has a wife). Seven drinks in, he politely tips and walks out. He looks as immaculate as when he entered—seven drinks seems like a casual evening for him.



Just as I set down the classy guy's first drink, in walks my second of the night. He's every mustachioed stereotype of a 70's porno—and not the expensive kind. Hell, where do you even buy a red suit? There's no one around yet to impress, and still somehow he's boasting and winking victory laps around the entryway before he even makes it to my counter. "Thought I'd try something new-s tonight..." he says to me with an eyebrow raise and an inward lean, "...but I like to leave my work at the office." The expectant expression that he held for the next god-knows-how-many seconds led me to believe that that was supposed to be a joke. I figured I wasn't getting his order until either of us caved, so I forced a pity chuckle. At least the man had simple enough tastes...

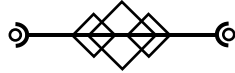
Mercifully, the man didn't stick around too long. Somewhere on his third drink he receives word (from an earpiece?) and stands up with a solemn look in his eyes. Grabbing the nearest blunt object, he whispers, "The team say there's another fight brewing," and struts out.



At some point, early in the night but still a respectable hour to be drinking, a curly-haired blonde girl walks in with three friends. They're all dressed professionally, and I can tell right away that the vodka is coming down. They're a chatty bunch, and by the time they motion that they're ready to order, I know more about their sex and love

lives than the men they're sleeping with do—par for the course at my job, though. They seem frustrated with the scene around here, but with specimens like my last couple of customers, who can blame them? The curly haired girl has this odd habit of trying to include me in their conversation, turning to explain things to me as she orders her drink. Time to break out the shaker.

The girls are all about four drinks deep when they look ready to stumble off somewhere else. I take their cards as they fiddle with compacts, reapply makeup, and gather up coats.



Things have started to pick up. I turn to the latest arrival, and she is exquisite: a vision in a white dress. Bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but some half-forgotten sadness lingering in the shadows of her features. She asks for her drink in a thrilling voice, and I'm immediately certain of two things: she is wealthy, and she is reckless. I'm sure her voice could launch a thousand ships, or at least some boats beating against the current to reach the green light at the end of her dock. I stand up on my toes to get the good Kentucky bourbon, because what else could I serve her? "Why don't we all have one! Make that three!" she cries, addressing the men accompanying her. I resist the urge to visibly shake my head as I pick up my muddler.

It's a while before the girl in white motions that she wishes to close her tab. The substantial bill—a whopping eight drinks for her and her companions—clearly does not faze her, though, and she smiles carelessly as she hands over her money.



Halfway through my shift a new pair enters. Skinny, Italian-looking man, tête-à-tête with another who's got to be his younger brother. They look like the kind who run the family business together. Hushed, but intense conversation, and a wariness in their body language that suggests mistrust. They don't want me listening and they don't want me bothering, they just want to sit and talk together with their goddamn drinks. That's fine by me—I'm sure plenty of people will be demanding more of my attention later. Skinny guy starts to order, then turns to his brother. "How do you say it?" Brother responds. "That's it?" Guy acts like I don't fucking speak English. Whatever, as long as he tips well. I grab the Appleton.

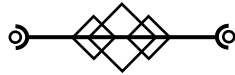
The Italian guys slink off, still deep in conversation, after only one round of drinks. Things seem tense between them. Trouble with the family business, perhaps?



Then, a new customer strides in looking like he's on a mission. Suave guy, bespoke suit, Omega watch. He looks like the type to always be drinking some classically classy cocktail. I raise an eyebrow at his order. "You sure?" "Yes." Damn fancy guys thinking they know what they're talking about. It's an insult to bartenders everywhere,

especially when he says it like a catch phrase. I'm sure that before I know it some other clueless customer nearby is going to copy his order. The crowds are clearing out for the night, though, and he can see my every move, so I do as he asks, finishing off a bottle of vermouth in the process. Such a shame that its final pour should be into such a travesty of a drink.

He's spent three of those very wrong drinks chatting up a girl, having a hushed and urgent conversation with a sketchy looking stranger, and looking mysterious when suddenly he's got to go, *stat*. I run his card and he's gone before I know it. At least he tipped me for my trouble.



In rushes a young doctor looking lost and out-of-sorts. Blue scrubs, baby face, and hair like he had just gotten off a roller coaster. He wasn't drunk, I would later learn, but just...absent-minded. The doc pulls out his phone with an awkward glance around and pretends to message someone—fooling no one—as he makes his way to the bar. I ask his order, but instead of a response, he cocks his head and stares into the distance, like he's having a full-on Socratic dialogue in his own head. "Hey buddy!" I bark, bringing him back to this planet, "What'll it be?" Almost wish I hadn't asked. Judging by the bright red of his face, he's the only person more embarrassed than I am as I mix him the one drink that even the blonde from before would find too effeminate. I slide it over—discreetly—and watch him nearly spit out his first dainty sip as he excitedly answers his phone. "BROWN BEAR!!" he coos. I'm hesitant to start this guy on a tab. Poor kid looks like he's a regular one-and-done.

Proving my point, the kid is a huggy mess just a few sips in. To my astonishment, he came back to me again and again throughout the night, and (against my better judgment) I obliged him five sickeningly sweet drinks. Lucky for me, before the kid could embarrass himself any more, an older doctor bursts in—anger in his eyes—and grabs the younger kid by the scruff. I've never seen a more sarcastic and performative tongue-lashing as they exit, but judging by the kid's vacant daydreaming, I would assume it wasn't his first.



Shaggy guy wearing a bathrobe and bowling shoes strolls in five minutes before last call humming Creedence like he doesn't have a care in the world. "What can I get for you?" I ask, as he settles down comfortably into a chair as though he owns it. He doesn't even miss a beat of "Lookin' Out My Back Door" as he answers, and I'm not sure how he did it. Next thing I know, his feet are on my goddamn bar. "Get your shoes off my bar or I will fuck you up," I spit at him while pouring milk.

"Yeah? Well, that's just, like, your opinion, man."

Nonetheless, the shoes come down. He lights a cigarette. Hoo boy. "Last call is in five minutes," I tell him, handing him a rocks glass. He nods, hands me a crumpled wad of cash, downs his drink, and strolls unhurriedly out the door.