

Barkeep

Eric was new to the city. New in every way. New job. New apartment. New home furnishings. New kitchen utensils. He had sold or given away virtually everything he had owned before the move. He packed a few cherished belongings, a week's worth of work clothes, toiletries, his laptop, a few odds and ends, and every comfortable item of clothing he could stuff into his allotted check-in and carry-on bags. He left his desktop computer and all its accoutrements with a friend to be shipped at a later time, once all of the necessary furniture could be purchased. From the airport he took a cab to his apartment to drop off his things. He then took the cab to the department store, where he picked up a pillow, an air mattress, a blanket, paper bowls, plasticware, cans of soup, and since he had arrived before the power company had turned on his electricity, a camping stove and lantern. Thankfully, his apartment had water. He started his new job the next day.

Three days later, and one day after they had promised, the electric company turned on his power. As a celebration, he turned on every light in the apartment; and then quickly turned them off for fear of the inevitable power bill. He took his first warm shower since leaving Washington. He walked to the corner grocery store and purchased fresh meat and vegetables. He cooked his first real meal in the new apartment and ate it in on the floor while streaming the new hit show on his phone. He had to text a friend for the name, he couldn't remember what it was, just that it was popular.

Two weeks after the move he purchased his first vehicle, a used 2005 Kawasaki Vulcan with very low mileage. He did question the practicality of his first vehicular purchase being a motorcycle, but that was what he wanted. Used cars were too expensive anyway.

He stayed close to home the first two months. He occasionally met his new co-workers for drinks at bars and breweries. He asked them about things to do, places to go, places to drink, places to meet people, paying careful attention to the suggestions of some of his co-workers, and carefully ignoring the suggestions of others. He looked each place up online, noting their busiest times and any upcoming events. One brewery looked particularly promising. There was an important quarterly work meeting the following Wednesday, which reportedly always ended around three, at which point everyone was free to go. If that was indeed the case, he would go to the brewery after the meeting.

Wednesday arrived. The meeting was long. But it did end at 2:45. Earlier than predicted. His boss, or supervisor as she preferred to be called, suggested he stay and meet some of the team members outside of his immediate department, which he did. The impromptu meet and greet kept him later than he wanted, but not by much. He left work at 3:20 and made it to the brewery at 3:45.

As the internet predicted, it was a slow time for the brewery. He sat down at a table, but found it was unsteady, and wobbled if he leaned on it. He checked another table and found it was much more secure. He hung his jacket over the back of the chair, claiming it as his for the duration of his visit. Glancing at the bar he saw it was tended by a young blonde woman, though she was partially hidden by the tap handles. He perused the menu, delighted to see that they offered flights. Having made his decision, a Belgian Quad, a Summer Ale brewed with Strawberries, a Hazy IPA, and a Coconut Porter, he approached the bar.

The bartender emerged from behind the tap handles. Her eyes were the first thing he noticed, a friendly deep brown, under dark well-shaped eyebrows. His gaze moved down her slightly aquiline nose to a warm, open smile. Her head tilted back slightly as part of her non-verbal greeting, whereupon he noticed how slender her neck was. She had a prominent jawline and a slight dimple on her chin. Her light blonde hair was pulled back in a loose bun at the back of her head. She was very beautiful. At a single glance she conjured up all his youthful insecurities. She was gorgeous and he wasn't. And now he had her full attention.

She spoke, "Hi! How are you today?"

He felt his neck burn.

"Good how are you?"

"Doing great. What can I get you?"

It was a normal conversation between bartender and patron. No reason to feel nervous and yet he did. He ordered a flight, whereupon she gave him a piece of paper to write on. Immediately he felt insecure about his handwriting. In the end it didn't matter if it looked good. He just wanted it legible enough that she wouldn't have to ask him what it said. That would be embarrassing. She took the piece of paper, perused it, and returned with a four ounce pour of every beer he asked for. He thanked her and retreated to his table.

There were several large TV screens positioned throughout the taproom playing nonsense he didn't care about. He sipped his beers, staring up at the screen, trying not to look at her. She walked to and fro behind the bar, keeping busy. She turned to survey the mostly empty taproom. He looked up at her. They made eye contact.

Smiling, she said, "Thanks for coming in today. It was getting kind of boring in here."

"Happy to help."

He thought that was a reasonably amusing thing to say. She either agreed or laughed lightly out of politeness. It didn't really matter either way. The interaction was positive enough to make him feel confident. At least confident enough to try and strike up a conversation. He just needed to find something to talk about.

She walked out from behind the counter, carrying a rag to wipe down the tables. She had a light, delicate frame. She wore olive shorts and a pale blue shirt. He noticed she was wearing a knee brace. He wondered if she would mind him commenting on it. There was probably a better way to start a conversation, but he had to start somewhere.

"What happened?" He nodded towards the brace.

She sighed, "I don't know yet. I went running last week and I was fine the whole time, but then later that afternoon my knee started hurting. I iced it and kept off it and all that. Seemed like it was okay and then I went running again, and then it started to hurt while I was on the trail so... I don't know. I've got an appointment with a physical therapist coming up so..."

Here she punctuated her account with a shrug.

“I guess I’ll find out then.”

“Hopefully they can get it resolved for you.”

“Hopefully. I’m supposed to run a half-marathon next month.”

“Oh wow. That sucks. That was really bad timing.”

“Yes, it was. Bad time for my knee to decide it hates me.”

There was a brief lull. He had to keep the dialogue going somehow.

“So, you mentioned a trail, is it primarily for running or do they have bike trails there too? I’m new to the area.”

“Okay, cool, welcome to Texas.”

“Thank you.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“Washington. State. Not DC.”

Smiling, “I figured. And to answer your question there are a lot of good bike trails around here. I forget what the name of the park is, but there’s one that goes around a lake in the area that’s really pretty.”

“Cool, I’ll have to check that out.”

The door opened behind him. Three people walked in, noisily. He assumed three because he heard three voices. Two male and one female. The bartender greeted them, tossed the rag over her shoulder, cast a parting smile in his direction, and headed back to the bar.

It seemed like the conversation had gone pretty well. He realized his heart was pounding and his palms were sweaty. He hadn’t felt that way talking to a girl since high school. He wasn’t sure what made her different from all the other girls he had chatted with since. He couldn’t stop looking at her. He hoped it wasn’t too noticeable.

The noisy group approached the bar. Turns out there were four of them. Two girls and two guys. A double date perhaps. One of the girls was silent. Which was why he only heard three voices. He listened to them talk to the bartender. She had a way about her which instantly set everyone at ease. So far anyway. Admittedly, he had only seen her interact with a small handful of people. The group tried sample after sample. One of the men fancied himself a connoisseur. He was probably trying to impress the girls. As though girls were impressed by aficionados of craft beer. The silent one was the first to make up her mind. She ordered the Coconut Porter. He didn’t pay attention to what the others chose.

After the group had finished ordering, they retreated to a booth in the corner of the bar. He glanced at the bartender, who now sat on a stool scrolling through her phone. He looked away, turning his attention to his flight. He had to get through it quickly. Based on his internet research the taproom was going to get much busier in about an hour.

He tried to anticipate what might be said when he returned to the bar to order his second round. She might ask him what he thought of the beers. He tried to analyze the taste of each one, to detect notes of this and notes of that, but he was never very good at that kind of thing. He liked beer, he just didn't have a very discerning palate.

He carried his empty flight up to the bar. She was still sitting on the stool when he approached. She hopped down and walked towards him, smiling.

"What did you think?"

"It was all great. I think I liked the Coconut Porter the best."

"That's one of our most popular beers. Second round?"

"Yeah, I think I'd like another flight, but I'm not sure what to get. I was actually wondering if you would be willing to select four beers for me."

"Hmm, that's kind of risky. What if you don't like them? Then you'll think less of me."

He smiled, "I'm sure you are a woman of excellent taste."

She smiled in return, "All right, I'll pick you out four beers. Is there any kind you don't like?"

"I don't like sours."

"Me neither."

"You see? I knew you had good taste."

She retreated behind the tap handles. He could only see a portion of her face through them. He saw her left eye. She looked deep in concentration, trying to select the best for him. She glanced back in his direction. Her eye softened, and she smiled. He felt a thrill rush through him. She turned back to the beers and he watched her, unabashedly. She returned with the flight. She leaned over the bar; a few strands of hair fell across her face. She carefully wrote the names of the beers out on the paper, pointing them out to him as she did so. She had long, slender fingers. There was a Peach Saison, a Coffee Stout with maple, a West Coast IPA, and a Pilsner. She said the stout was her favorite.

"Thank you, barkeep."

He mentally kicked himself. That was a stupid thing to say, wasn't it?

She laughed, "Barkeep? Better than bar wench I guess."

He returned to his table. Everything seemed to be going well. He had been uncharacteristically smooth, or so he hoped. He could never really be sure. She didn't seem annoyed by him, but she could be a good actress. He was her customer after all, so she had to be nice to him.

More patrons came in. A couple and a man, about his own age. They all took seats at the bar. The couple instantly started chatting her up. Maybe she knew them. They seemed very friendly with her. While she was busy chatting with the couple the man looked her up and down, lecherously. Eric immediately hated him. After she had finished serving the couple she moved on to the lech. Eric couldn't hear what the man was saying, though from his body language he was fairly certain the man

was trying to flirt. He was gratified to see that she was not responding positively. He could also tell that the flirting made her feel uncomfortable, which made him feel bad for her. It also made him desperately hope she hadn't felt that way with him.

A second bartender appeared shortly after. A man with long hair and a beard. He and the blonde conferred quietly behind the counter. Talking shop, presumably. They laughed to each other about something. Their conference was interrupted by one of the men from the party of four ordering for the table. The new bartender took the orders. She stepped out from behind the bar. She started walking past him, pausing briefly.

"How do you like the stout?"

"You were right, it's very good."

"Well, word to the wise it is a limited release. But we do have it in cans to go if you want."

"Gotcha, I might have to grab a pack then."

She smiled in parting and made her way to the bathroom. He slowly finished the rest of his flight. He eyed the flirtbag suspiciously, trying not to be obvious. He studied the couple for a moment, they seemed happy. He couldn't help but be jealous. He briefly turned to the foursome in the booth. Three out of four were having a good time. The silent girl listened to the others, sipping her beer. She looked up at him. They made eye contact. Both smiled. Then turned back to their lot in life.

He felt a presence at his elbow. Startled, he turned to find she had stopped beside him on her way back to the bar. She laughed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was just going to say if you like the maple Coffee Porter you should come back and try the Oatmeal Stout. They'll be releasing that one this Saturday."

"Oh cool, yeah I'll definitely come back and try that."

"See that you do."

See that you do? She would never say that if she wasn't interested in him. Would she? She walked back behind the counter. He was sure she was about to look back at him before she was distracted by the flirtbag asking for a sample. She brought it to him. He murmured various criticisms, attempting to disguise it in an overly friendly tone of voice. Eric heard phrases like, "a little bitter for my taste," "some people like that," "not for me," "sour after-taste." The man asked for another sample, the strawberry Summer Ale. He shook his head and then asked for the first thing he had ordered. He had somehow forgotten what it was. When she returned with his beer, he started asking her about the signage. Eric strained to hear.

"You should make this more visible here on the bar. Like I would've never realized that you had a kitchen."

"Oh gotcha, well I mean..."

Before she could continue the man picked up a little tabletop sign and moved it to various places on the bar, explaining how this would increase its visibility.

“And then I think the digital sign up there scrolls through the different options too quickly. Like I didn’t see that Peach Saison until now. And I definitely would’ve tried a sample of that if I’d seen it.”

“Oh, I can get you a sample if you’d like.”

“Maybe after I’m done with this, but y’know it just went by so fast otherwise I would’ve already asked for it.”

He offered a few other additional points of unsolicited advice. She said she’d ask her manager about it. He said something, which Eric assumed was condescending, but only because he couldn’t stand the stranger. Which was partly because the man was clearly rude and partly because he was monopolizing all her time and Eric wanted to talk to her too.

She retreated to a corner of the bar, muttering something to her co-worker, who nodded, glancing at the man. Her co-worker, casually as he could, moved forward, placing himself between her and the man so that, should the man have a question, he could intercept it. Eric appreciated this little act of workplace chivalry. Not only did it protect her from flirtbag, but it also caused her to occupy the other side of the bar, where he could have her undivided attention when he ordered a final beer. He didn’t want to immediately approach her though. A bathroom break was in order. Afterward, he’d order his last beer, and maybe, if the moment felt right, ask for her number.

As he stood at the urinal, he replayed all their interactions with each other as best he could. He was second-guessing himself. Maybe he had misinterpreted the signs. It’d be premature to ask for her number. She’d just be creeped out by him. He should give it just a little bit longer. When he stepped out of the bathroom his table had been cleared of the empty flight glasses. He glanced at the bar and saw that she wasn’t there. No reason to panic just yet. She had probably gone to check on a keg. He reclaimed his table, waited a few minutes, and then ordered a beer from the other bartender. He’d close out his tab with her when she came back.

Fifteen minutes passed by the clock above the bar. She was nowhere to be seen. He drank his beer as slowly as he could. Twenty minutes passed and his glass was empty. It was time to close the tab. He didn’t trust himself to drive if he drank any more. He glanced at the bar again; just the bearded one playing with his phone. Maybe she was on break. He stood, approached the bar, and asked for water. He was politely directed to the cooler in the corner. This could work. He could pretend to be sobering up until she came back. Then he could close the tab with her. He took a plastic cup of water back to his table and slowly drank it, staring into one of the television screens. Flirtbag ordered another beer. Eric wondered if he wasn’t any better than him. He had to be, to a small degree. She hadn’t been uncomfortable around him. But maybe that was wishful thinking. Maybe he had misread the signs. Maybe that was why she had disappeared. The bearded one could tend the bar, while she waited for the creeps to close out.

He drank another cup of water. It was a long drive back, so he took a final piss. Then he closed his tab with the man with the long hair. He checked the receipt, hoping her name would be listed as the server. No such luck.

He thought about her the whole drive back to his apartment. He thought about her as he cooked his dinner. He thought about her as he ate it. He was briefly distracted by a movie, but he thought about her as soon as it was over.

The next day he considered going back to the brewery after work, then decided he should wait. He was afraid he might look like a stalker. That fear was based on the premise that were she working that evening, she would assume he had come for her and not for the beer. This would be very narcissistic of her, regardless of how true it was. The beer was excellent. But while it was an apples to oranges comparison, she was more charming and more beautiful than the beer was good.

As he thought back to the previous evening, he suddenly remembered she had given him a perfect excuse to go back. The Oatmeal Stout was being released on Saturday. He double checked the hours and decided to go mid-afternoon, hoping that this would cover any potential shift change, thus maximizing his chances for running into her.

When he arrived on Saturday, the bearded bartender and another woman were tending the bar. The woman was very friendly. She was a good bartender. But she wasn't the blonde. He hated to refer to the girl as "the blonde," but he didn't know what else to call her. He didn't know her name. He had checked the brewery's every social media outlet. He had scoured every post and share. He had searched through "likes", "loves", and comments. He had found no trace of her. He did find the bartender with the beard and the long hair. He had even figured out his name from the comments: Tim. This information didn't particularly help him.

He went back the following Wednesday. Hoping that since she had worked the previous Wednesday that she normally worked that day. It was the woman from Saturday. She was quick to complain to him that she was flying solo that night. He offered his sympathies. As on his first visit he had two flights. Apparently, they were on the last keg of the maple Coffee Porter. He got one of them in each flight.

He went back the following Friday evening. Friday nights would be busy. They would need a lot of staff on hand to handle the crowd. This would increase the chances that she would be working that evening. It was indeed busy. But she wasn't there. He drank his beers slowly, secretly hoping that if he was there long enough, she would appear.

Looking back, he wondered if he should've been bolder. If he should've asked for her name, or maybe even her number. Or would that have just frightened her away? His memory of their exchange was positive. She seemed to like him well enough. But he couldn't be sure. What if she hadn't liked him at all? The thought troubled him greatly. He had only seen her once, and yet he cared more about what she thought about him than most of his co-workers.

He couldn't be that wrong though. She had liked him. At least a little. What convinced him more than anything else was the look she had given him through the tap handles. It was an unguarded look. It was a shy, stolen glance. She was wondering what he thought of her, maybe. At any rate, it was a look of interest. She was curious about him. How the hell did he leave without getting her name?

He went back the following Wednesday. It hadn't worked out the last time he tried it, but the first time he saw her was on a Wednesday. First time, and so far, only time. He parked his bike. He shut off the engine and sat on it for a long time, staring out at the passing traffic. He scoffed at himself. A voice in his head told him he was becoming a stalker. Another voice immediately retorted: No. There was a connection. Maybe it wouldn't pan out. But maybe it would. Maybe they were meant to make each other happy. Or at the very least, try to.

He walked inside. She wasn't there. He was beginning to associate the brewery with disappointment. A very large man was tending the bar that day. He was very nice. But he wasn't her.

He watched patrons come and go. Observing them as surreptitiously as he could. Almost all of them came in with friends. A handful came in alone, and were either met later on by other people, or sat at the bar and inevitably started talking to whoever else was sitting nearby. He realized he barely knew anyone in the city, and they were all co-workers, which prompted the further realization that he was lonely. This wasn't a new phenomenon. He had been lonely in Washington too. He was being proactive, though. He was trying to find the person with whom he had made the strongest connection in his new home. He internally scoffed at himself. Repeatedly going to a brewery in the vain hope that a beautiful woman who might've liked him was there wasn't being proactive. He didn't know what it was; but it was closer to desperation. And who was to say that any good would come of them meeting again? Maybe they'd hit it off initially only to find out later they couldn't stand each other. Maybe they'd eventually hurt one other. But that still wasn't a reason not to try. He just had to find her. But what if she already had a boyfriend? He didn't remember seeing a ring, but that didn't mean she didn't already have someone. For the next hour he oscillated between hope and resignation. By the end of the evening he had given up, wondering why he had bothered to hope for as long as he had.

The next day he searched for bike trails. He was reasonably certain he had found the one she had referred to. There were a few in the area that went around a lake but given the proximity of one of them to the brewery, he assumed it was the one.

After searching for the park he remembered that she was going to be running a half-marathon. He recalled her saying it was "next month." He thought back to when he had first visited the brewery and realized it was still "next month." He did a quick search online. There were two in the immediate area. One had just passed. The other was the following Saturday. Maybe she was running in it. He couldn't run a half-marathon, but he could wait at the end and hopefully see her. Assuming her knee was cooperating with her. He wondered if it was worth it to wait for the whole race on the off chance she was there. In turn he wondered what were the odds that her knee was better, that this half-marathon was the one she had intended to run, that he would even see her in the crowd if she was there, and that they would become friends or preferably something more if all of the other conditions were met. He was fairly certain the odds weren't good, but he still went. As expected, he didn't see her. It wasn't a complete waste of time though. He met someone else who had recently moved from Washington. They decided to go bike riding sometime and exchanged numbers.

Over the next few months, he tried many different bars, breweries, and restaurants. He worked his way through the recommendations of those whose opinions he trusted, then moved on to those whose opinions he was unsure of. He was pleasantly surprised by some of the places suggested by the latter group, but for the most part he had been proven right in his skepticism.

Slowly but surely he settled in. He regularly went to quiz nights with a friend from work. It was the quiz night at a cocktail bar. This particular friend didn't like beer. Every other Saturday, weather permitting, he went bike riding with his new friend from Washington. He played games online with his desktop, which had arrived two weeks after his move, though he had taken almost a month to actually set it up. He even went on blind dates. None of them worked out.

The quarterly meeting came up again. He realized he hadn't been back to the brewery since he had given up on seeing her again. He wondered if he had given up too soon. He had only gone four times, after all. He also didn't know why he hadn't gone back again in the ensuing months. He loved the beer. Perhaps he was just tired of being disappointed she wasn't there. The meeting was over at four o'clock. Afterward he headed straight to the brewery.

As he expected, she wasn't there. However, Tim, the man with the long-hair and beard, was. He ordered a flight and took it back to his table. He wondered for a very long time if he should ask the bartender if she was still working there. He decided against it.

As he drank his flight, thinking about her yet again, he realized he couldn't remember exactly what she looked like. He knew if he saw her again, he would know it was her, and all the images of her he had stored away in his mind would come rushing forward. The one memory of her that he could recall with almost photographic accuracy was her looking back at him through the tap handles. Perhaps because that was when she seemed most interested in him. She thought that he couldn't see her, so she had let her guard down. He saw the graceful curve of her eyebrow. The wisp of blonde hair. Her jawline. The slight upward curl of her lips. Her soft, brown eye wishing he would ask for her name.

He stood and approached the bartender.

"Excuse me."

"Yessir."

"Umm, I was wondering if... The first time I was here there was a blonde woman working here and I was... wondering if she still worked here."

The bearded bartender looked him up and down, warily.

"We've had several blonde women work here."

"She was a runner."

"Oh, yeah. She doesn't work here anymore. Her last day was last Friday."

Last Friday. Idiot. If he had only kept coming back.

"Oh... thanks."

He and the bartender looked at each other for a moment, wondering where the conversation would take them. Could he ask for her name? Could he ask if the bartender knew where she was working now? It seemed inappropriate. Based on his expression, the bartender agreed.

"I'll go ahead and close my tab."

The man paid and left. Once the door was closed and he was certain the man was gone, he scoffed and pulled out his phone. Tim searched for her name and started texting.

"Hi! Hope you're liking the new job! Thought you might like to know that creep from a while back came in asking about you."

He set his phone aside and took another patron's order. When he returned to his phone she had already responded.

"Ugh. Did you thank him for all the advice about the signs? Whata douche. Also, miss you and Hannah. We should hang out soon."

He was momentarily confused. Was that the same guy? He remembered the "sign douche," as the man was unaffectionately nicknamed, was very particular about his beer. Like someone who wanted to look like an expert but who clearly didn't know what he was talking about. This guy didn't seem like that. But he knew he recognized him. Now he wasn't sure. Tim shrugged. Either way it didn't matter.

"Miss you too. Talk soon."