

Archipelago

Dan noticed that of the four ceiling fans spinning above the strip mall Irish pub's dining room and bar, only one of them turned counterclockwise. And Dan assumed that he was the only person ever to have noticed this.

The loud foursome of sixtysomething golfers, fresh from the links dressed in loose pastel polos, belted khaki pants and all still wearing white visors or caps, flagged down the young but already weathered waitress to order another round of bottled imports.

Dan knew better than mentioning this incongruity with the fans to anyone. Previous similar instances where he pointed out discrepancies in various eateries, retail establishments and public buildings were returned with either polite, empty responses like "Well, sir, I'll inform my manager about it" to baffled or suspicious looks.

The waitress, Molly by her name tag because Xenia wasn't Irish enough, gave up waiting for the bartender, who was talking to the bar's lone occupant, a woman sipping a gin and tonic through a stir straw waiting for a Tinder date, and pulled the four green bottles of beer from the cooler under the bar, popping the top off each with the opener fastened beside it before setting them on the waiting tray with practiced precision.

The day manager, Glenn, pinching hairs on his sparse mustache, peeked through the hazy Plexiglas square on the double-swinging door to the kitchen as Molly/Xenia walked back to the golfers; his eyes followed the swaying two back pockets of her jeans.

After the bartender stepped away to address a ringing telephone, Sharon glanced at her cellphone and rechecked its volume setting then looked out into the row of parking spaces, scanning the cars for passengers.

Judd told the person on the other end of the call that he was swamped and couldn't talk now and would deal with it when he got home, then flashed a smile to the woman.

On the other side of the strip mall, waiting for a break in traffic to exit the parking lot, Frank smacked the top of the steering wheel with his open palm, saying over and over again, "I can't do this yet. It's too soon, Amanda. It's too soon."

In the converted storage closet that was his office, Glenn began to create next week's schedule ensuring that Xenia was working on the days he would also be there.

"...and after Norman, already two over par, drops his Titleist in the front bunker on 17, he hurls the 9-iron into the water and starts cursing like a sailor, kicking the cart. It's only after he calms down a bit, I go up to him and say, 'You do know that that was my club.'"

Finished with his order of chewy fish and dark, crunchy chips, which the atlas-sized menu boasted as “authentic” and “classic,” Dan sighed and scanned the restaurant for his waitress, who was nowhere to be found. The only one he saw was setting down beer bottles on a table for several old men, one of which had his hand on the small of her back.

“It’s not my fault that guy is staring at the ceiling and taking two hours to eat. The schedule says I’m off at 4, Glenn, so I’m off at 4. I got to pick up my kids. Let Xe take it.”

Sharon tinkled the ice cubes in her empty glass with the straw.

When Dan glanced up again, the waitress was plopping down on the seat in the opposite side of his booth, exhaling and running her hands across her forehead and up into her curly brunette hair where they remained.

One of the golfers probed his hirsute ear with his pinkie.

Xenia lifted her gaze, saw across from her a bewildered man with 60-grit sandpaper scruff, and said ...

Dan didn’t hear what she said because he was distracted by her sharp cornflower eyes.

Judd placed a gin and tonic with extra gin in front of the woman on a flimsy square napkin, its edge fluttering from the artificial breeze, and said, “This one’s on the house. Beautiful.”

On the shelf above Glenn's desk was a three-ring binder containing the employee handbook, which states that no employee may provide complementary food or beverage without the permission of a manager.

"Hey, you alright? Good. I just needed a place to hide for a sec."

The eldest of the golfers was lecturing the others on the absolute need to be at home any time the wetback landscapers were going to be there.

Five more minutes, Sharon thought, her thumbs hopscotching across her cellphone's touchscreen. I'll give him five more minutes.

As she talked, Dan unconsciously sat up a little straighter, rolled his shoulders back, bit the inside of his lip to prevent a smile from forming and fought the urge to slide his hand across the top of his hair. His heart rate increased by 20 beats per minute, his scrotum tingled and a lively glow ignited in his slightly widening eyes. He didn't know what to do with his hands, fidgeting on either side of the paper placemat. This feeling, wonderful, euphoric and rare, not only of witnessing something, someone beautiful before him but having her engaging him, willingly, smiling despite her woeful testimony of employment conditions, acknowledging him as real, as someone she could connect with, confide in, share, as if every spinning molecule in existence was timed to align all reality to this one moment of covalence, this feeling, this feeling ... he

hated it. He hated it because it wouldn't last. It never did. She would get up, clear his plate and bring him his check, and he would leave.

After Glenn noticed the two glasses in front of the woman at the bar, he inspected her bill and asked Judd if he could speak to him for a minute.

You almost here? :)

“You see that fan over there? Notice anything about it?”

Dan answered the question, which Xenia posed as rhetorical, with such swiftness that it squeezed into the short pause between the question mark of her question and the capital letter of the first word of its answer that Xenia, stunned, stretched the pause into a moment.

Each and every one of the four men was intimidated by the other three and in response exuded an air of confidence and practiced a type of camaraderie that wasn't one-upmanship so much that it was an unspoken need to be equally elite. Last summer, after one of them purchased a new deluxe golf cart with an onboard television which piped in conservative and business news via satellite, the others followed suit, never once bringing it up in conversation.

As Judd opened his wallet to take out \$5 for the woman's drink, he ignored the photo of his wife seven years younger and many pounds lighter and his son, with a rare smile, who hadn't grown up at all.

Resisting the urge to gulp the rest of her drink, Sharon regretted sending the text message, not because she didn't want to meet the pleasant looking Frank who didn't smile in any of his four profile pictures, but because she didn't want to come across as desperate, even though she admits to herself each night after leaving her bank teller job, driving to her apartment, watching programs on Netflix and going to bed alone she is undoubtedly just that.

“Yeah, that's right,” said Xenia, both incredulous of and admiring this man. “It bugs me.”

Frank, confident in his decision and driving either toward a cemetery or a bench beside a park fountain—he hadn't decided which—heard the distinctive chime emitting from his mobile phone lying on the passenger seat, firmly set his jaw and made an illegal U-turn.

Dan explained that the direction a ceiling fan spins causes different effects. If it spins counterclockwise, as one views it from the ground, it pushes air downward against people's skin making them feel cooler. If it spins clockwise, it pulls up the lower, cooler air in a room and redistributes the higher, warmer air to the rest of the room, making this the preferred setting for winter.

Glenn noticed one of the golfers waving at him and as he walked over to see what they wanted, he looked around wondering where Xenia was.

“So not only are our fans spinning in different directions, most of them aren’t even spinning in the right direction? Figures.”

After a short conversation in which Judd both learned that the woman had likely been stood up and attempted to persuade her to go out with him instead, his logic, almost mathematical although not expressed as such, being that one single person and another single person can and should equal two non-single people at a place that was not their present location, the woman informed him that, as much as she wished it were so, “it didn’t work that way.”

While one of the old men ordered another round of beers and two orders of onion rings, Glenn, seeing himself as a modern day Sherlock, noting the embroidered animals on the gentlemen’s shirts, the make and shine of their gold watches with segmented metal straps and butterfly clasps, the Mercedes logo on the fob of the set of keys resting on the table top, and the hint of cigar smoke that clung to their skin, swelled with a sense of pride at becoming someone inferior.

Sharon didn’t think of herself as beautiful, thought the bartender cheesy, maybe even a bit sarcastic, at the very least angling for a decent tip. She was quickly approaching 40 with two divorces under her belt to men who cheated on her with prettier, younger women. In recent years, she daily seesawed between the schools of Making An Effort and Why Bother?, annually made resolutions to join a gym and undo her dereliction but abandoned intentions at the exact middle of February, leap years excluded. She passively used the online dating app like a slot machine, never expecting to win a jackpot while a miniscule part of her achieved a thrill at the possibility.

“No, I did tell someone, and I would have got a ladder myself but my manager was all, like, ‘Wait staff are not authorized to perform building maintenance tasks.’”

The rearview mirror quickly filled with spinning red and blue light.

The bartender shrugged, picked up the empty glass and placed it in a quarter-full dish rack, which he carried back to the scullery.

Dan called the waitress Molly, but Xenia corrected him making it the first time she ever did.

Glenn turned toward the bar, planning to order Judd to pull out the four bottles in a tone and volume he hoped would carry back to the men, but found it vacant. And as he scanned the room to find neither of his employees, he was revisited by the same sensation he felt three years, eight months and 17 days prior when he stepped into the master bedroom’s walk-in closet to find half of the hangers missing.

“I’d hop ship if I thought it were any different somewhere else.”

From a tear roughly the length of a man’s clenched fist, all-purpose flour spilled to the tiled pantry floor.

“There goes my perfect record.”

Following a few minutes of clumsily recounting how he ended up in the pub, intending to be entertaining with a mix of charm, humor and sarcasm, or at least not pathetic and completely boring so as to extend the encounter even slightly, but finding it impossible in the captivated eyes of Xenia, who never once looked away, not to be honest, Dan summarized his plight by saying, “I’m adrift and I’m trying to find land.”

Glenn entered the appetizer order in the bar’s cash register and upon retrieving one of the beer bottles from the cooler, he saw Xenia seated and leaning forward in the corner booth with a young man. The neck slipped through his fingers, and the bottle thudded safely on a rubber mat beneath his feet.

She peered at Dan and saw a mirror, a face she could get used to. She saw him older and still looking back.

A man in a striped tie and short-sleeved shirt with its breast pocket drooping from the weight of a name tag approached the booth causing Dan to look up and Xenia not to.

Churning and barely concealing the fact, Glenn said, “Xenia, um, I, uh, know I shouldn’t have to remind you of the policy about sitting with customers, but ...,” briefly grinning toothlessly at the man, “and a manager just had to cover your table, which has some pretty important gentlemen we don’t want to let down, now do we? So, could you please be a dear and take them another round,” patting her shoulder.

Xenia silently looked at the hand on her shoulder, then up at Glenn, then at Dan with a smile, then back at Glenn.

Everyone in the bar stopped stunned and stared as the waitress vociferously demonstrated her extensive vocabulary.

Dan spotted something on the horizon.

Leaning on a stainless steel prep table, where he listened to the muffled but mostly discernible commotion, Judd withdrew his outstretched legs from the path of Xenia, bursting through the double-swinging door. He watched as she disappeared into a maintenance closet, re-emerged with an aluminum step ladder, its legs scraping noisily across the floor, and returned to the dining room.

The golfers snickered as they looked at the manager, standing there with his shoulders sagging, the young diner sliding out of the booth and contorting around him. One of them said, “A hundred dollars says he starts to cry. Who’s in?”

Sharon watched with amusement as the little drama played out, forgetting that the five minutes expired a while ago.

They rotated, Xenia holding the ladder while Dan ascended, him showing her that the blades could be safely stopped with one's hands and pointing out the location of the toggle switch that reversed the airflow, then him steadying the ladder for her as she fixed the other two fans. As she descended the ladder the second time, he offered her his hand and she took it and didn't let go as they faced each other for a silent moment, fluid smiles on the verge of laughing over the absurdity of a connection based on something as flimsy as a ceiling fan, but clinging to the scrap of flotsam with all their might because, well, it was something.

Frank held the door open for a glowing young couple leaving the pub before walking in from the summer heat to conditioned air and a slight breeze from overhead, finding Sharon sitting at the bar staring off at the empty booth in the corner and said, "Have you been waiting long?"

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