

Can I Get the Bill?

“I hope you drop your fuckin’ tray!” A drunken bar regular irrationally screams at Arsh Pannagh, slurring his words and accompanying them with flying wads of spit. The thought of his words lingered in her mind until the next day, her birthday. Pannagh only wanted to celebrate her 21st at her workplace, Earls. Everyone wore pink, her favourite colour, and were looking forward to their fun night ahead. He knew it was her birthday and made sure to show up promptly to the Earls bartop to continue the harassment as he knew she would be there celebrating for the second year in a row. Although Pannagh was off shift, the rude words continued to follow her.

They make their money, but at what cost? Imagine going out for a romantic dinner. The table is dimly lit with an orange hue from the flame of the candle, casting a cozy shadow across the restaurant, the wine glasses are polished flawlessly and placed beside the cutlery that reflects your own appearance. The server greets you with an inviting smile, perfectly setting the mood for the evening. A small drop of sweat rolls down their forehead as they scramble to find their pen and paper. Their eyes slyly flutter around to surrounding tables to see what their next move is after the greeting is finished. The seemingly polished server standing in front of you, asking if you’d like sparkling or still with a smile that hasn’t even twitched, has perfected the act of “keeping their cool” in a high stress environment.

The restaurant industry thrives on its’ customers. Making a solid connection with a table leads to returning customers and in turn can lead to a happier server. Walking up to familiar faces, asking them about their day and genuinely waiting for their response is what keeps business running. For Pannagh’s case, that bubbly, happy, and comedic repertoire with a few bar

regulars only left her feeling embarrassed. “One time [a bar regular] came up to me and was touching my butt, and then he came and pinched my tummy and goes ‘you could lose a couple, for sure.’” Pannagh’s only thought in that horrifying moment was, *did you actually just pinch my tummy?* He went for the cinch of her waist and pulled as hard as he could. Pannagh was appalled and knew at that moment that the regulars were getting too comfortable in her work environment.

Another regular who is now banned from Earls, as well as other chains within the Kamloops area, would purposely exploit Pannagh’s position as an employee. Drinks would be deliberately knocked over, then promptly followed with a comment on how Pannagh needs to clean it up, stat. He would comment on Pannagh’s physical appearance and even her personal entanglements. “He’d be like ‘oh, how’s your dad and the taxi driving business, are you hoping to take after him or is it because you're pretty enough to work here that you're gonna do this for the rest of your life?’,” she recalls the customer saying.

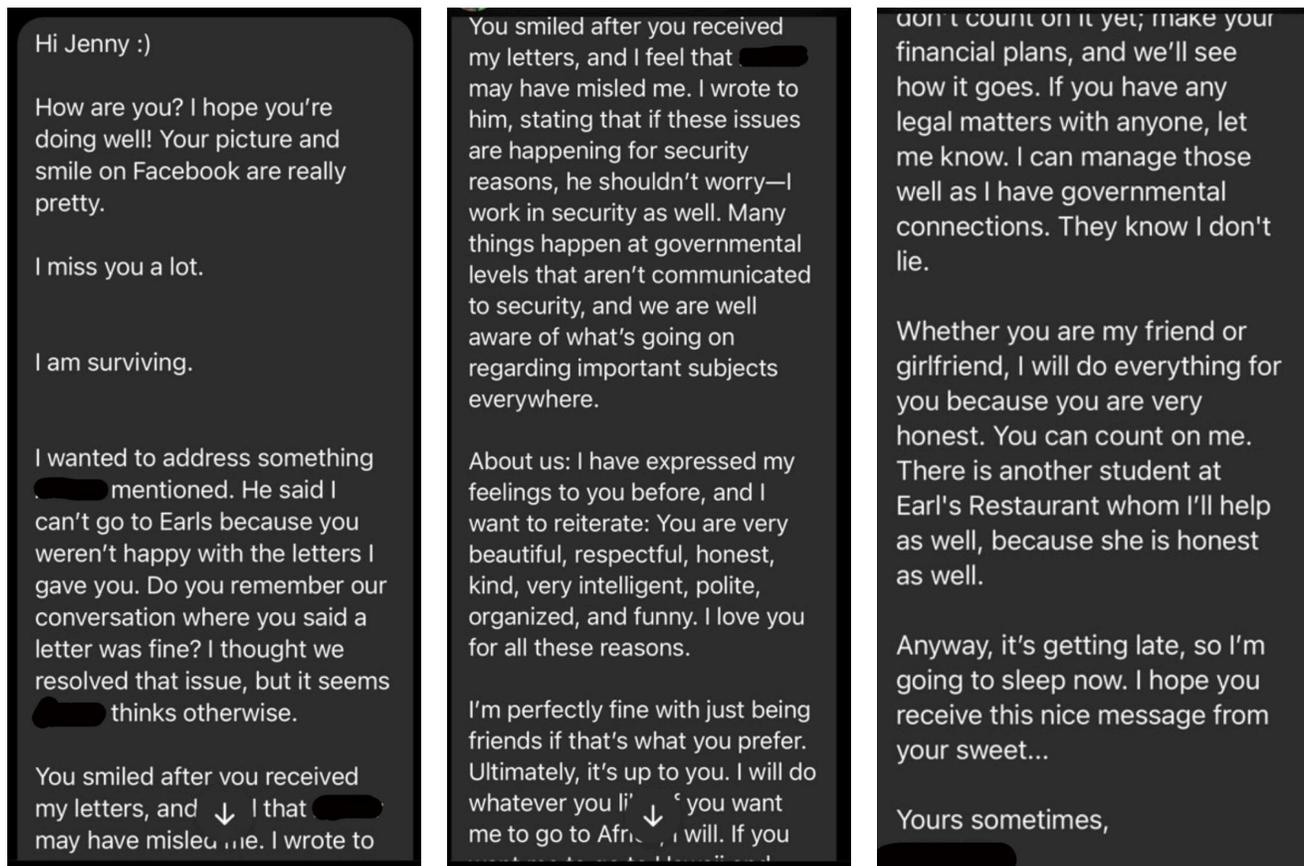
Pannagh is in her third year of her business major at Thompson Rivers University, and like many of her coworkers, she’s simply trying to get herself through school. In a position of vulnerability where the worker is oppressed by the customer, it can seem almost impossible for servers to keep their head up in such an environment.

Many servers can feel as though they become trapped in this precarious line of work. Most servers are between 18 and 29 years old. Many servers are just trying to get themselves through student loans. Many feel as though they should hold on to the job because they're making more money than they would at a 9-5 job. Others might not see post-secondary education as a viable path and so they lean on the restaurant industry to make ends meet on a monthly basis. Whatever the situation, all servers experience the same thing. Divides are created between

a server's true identity and the identity they must present, as if they're always on stage and the spotlight hits when they clock in for their shift. This exhaustion that servers face on a daily basis leaves them with little energy to explore and think, "what else is out there for me?"

While employee relationships are an important factor, especially in the restaurant industry, the line between employee-employer relationships can become blurred. As Xenis states, "you get hired on a smile," and in walks Jennifer Klenner at the end of May, 2024 to start at Earls in Kamloops. She remembers picking up one table in an open section, a decision that would completely change the trajectory of her outlook on the industry. "I first served him when I was getting trained. He was a regular guy I thought, he was just an older dude who was coming in for coffee and whatever. He came in quite often and would always get the same things, and then I started chatting a bit more when I served him and he would ask to sit in my section and I thought he was fine, but then he started writing me letters." Klenner never thought that the smile that landed her the job would place her in such a dangerous predicament. In the letters he would hand deliver to Klenner while she was on shift, he would go on to ask her to meet outside of work, specifically at the Tournament Capital Centre. She thought it was weird, but maybe he was harmless. Klenner recalls one evening she wasn't serving him but she would walk past his table periodically. He asked her if he could take photos of her. Klenner immediately knew their playful, joyous server-regular relationship had taken a turn. She told him no, but this didn't stop him from messing around. A short time after, he stopped Klenner to show her photos he had taken of her backside. "He had taken like three or four pictures of me and he was laughing, saying 'oh my gosh, look at these pictures I got of you!' I was like, you need to stop, that's really, really weird and makes me uncomfortable." After this, the letters became even more

persistent and in depth of how he would dream of Klenner at night and that he had feelings for her.



Klenner knew that this man was no longer harmless. The letters would turn into direct messages on Facebook messenger that would flood her phone. She knew this issue needed to be taken to management, to which the man was promptly told to no longer return to Earls. After his banning, Klenner would occasionally see him around the Kamloops area, but she'd do her best to avoid him in public settings as she felt it would be too uncomfortable and awkward to speak to him any further.

In a setting such as Earls, it's important for the servers to make close connections with their tables whenever they can. The repertoire becomes more casual, and the customers feel more inclined to sit in a restaurant where they feel welcomed with open arms and familiar faces. As this friendly service went completely sideways for Klenner, Hanna Rieck recalls a similar situation that ended in a full out brawl in the Earls parking lot. Rieck lived in a house with three other service industry workers. She remembers waking up one morning to find clothes sprawled out on her roommate's car, and a belt hanging off the windshield. "[The roommate] woke up and thought 'haha, funny, which one of you took your clothes off and put them on my car,' and we all said that none of us would do that." A couple weeks later, this roommate came into Earls for a relaxing dinner while Rieck was on shift. The roommate was sitting at the bar with another regular, an older gentleman who simply loved the atmosphere of Earls. That night, they discovered where the mysterious belt came from.

Rieck's roommate had recently befriended a new male coworker at Duffy's, and of course, this coworker was also an Earls regular. He had grown an obsession with Rieck's roommate, an obsession so strong that their household was terrified to sleep at night because this coworker would be standing outside of their house at four o'clock in the morning. As Rieck's roommate and the joyous regular continue to share a drink and talk about their day, the coworker witnessed this interaction while he was sitting at a table with his friends. When he and his friends left the restaurant, they didn't drive too far. They sat and waited in their truck for the regular to walk out, to which they started beating him up as soon as they saw him outside. "I ran outside, I got in between them. I'm holding the boys back, and we call the cops on [the coworker]. We had to get the cameras involved because they jumped him. [The regular] was literally standing outside waiting for a cab and having a cigarette, and these four boys just beat the shit out of

him,” Rieck recalls after breaking up the terrifying assault. As for the belt they found on the roommate’s car, the coworker said he was going to hang himself with it because Rieck’s roommate didn’t want to be with him. After the incident, the coworker was banned from Earls and fired from Duffy’s.