

## Tending Bar

By Alyssa Lenhoff

*With only a high school diploma, Jen Sutherin does the work of psychologist and doctor. The bartender says she once thought of going to college, but she says it's not likely to happen.*

Jen drags a damp rag across the wooden bar in a fluid, well-practiced motion. Fold the rag over the small stainless steel sink. Scan the customers' drinks. Eye the security camera. Check the clock. Two more hours until last call.



It's been a decent night – six regulars, four drop-ins and enough in tips to pay her cellular phone bill for the month. “Not bad for a girl with just a high school education,” she says while popping the lid off of a Bud Light for a customer who leaves her \$1 every time he downs another.

Talking while dropping money into the electronic cash register, she says she works four nights a week and spends her days cleaning the home that she shares with her boyfriend and their collection of animals - a raccoon, two dogs, three cats and a goat. She once entertained thoughts of being a veterinarian. “But I can't do that because I couldn't put an animal down,” she says. “And besides, I'm not smart enough to go to college. Vets have to go longer than doctors.”

Now 24 years-old, Jen Sutherin says she believes her future is already set: She doesn't think she wants children because she says she would want to be home with them all of the time and not work. She says college is out of the question because she doesn't have the brain for it or, “the funds.” And she questions whether marriage is a good idea. “I don't want to get married just to get divorced.”

Stories she hears from the customers play in her head as if they were in the jukebox at the end of the bar. Money problems. Broken relationships. Cheating husbands. Loneliness. Exhaustion. Drunken nights. Long days.

Fear of becoming like one of her customers keeps her where she is.

“I have thought about just taking a class or two. But I don't like school. I'm not a good student. I'm just not very smart and I'm not rich. I thought about being a veterinarian's assistant and I think you just go to school for that a little,” she said. Jen reluctantly walks back to the bar as the owner interrupts, “Excuse me, Jen. ‘If you get a chance, do you think you might want to get your customers the drinks that they want? If you get a chance and of course if you think it's a good idea.”

Jen hears the sarcasm and she casually shows him her middle finger.

Another customer walks in and Jen is back in the world and role of bar maid. Without asking him what he wants, Jen reaches into a silver cooler and pulls out a bottle of Bud Light and rests it on the wooden bar in front of him, twisting off the top without breaking her eye contact with the customer.

“How's life, Jen?” he asks.

She smiles and doesn't answer. A few minutes later, she asks him the same question. He tells her that his ex-wife is getting remarried and how his back hurts. Jen tells him that he should get to a doctor.

A man sitting closest to the video game at the end of the bar taps his beer bottle to get her attention.

“You just don't like me talking to anyone but you,” she shouts.

He shakes his head no. “I just want another beer,” he says.

She hands him a Miller and smiles. “I thought you wanted me to give you some advice too.”

He starts to say something and then stops.

She turns around. “What?”

He keeps his head down.

“Were you going to insult me?” she asks.

“Never,” he answers.