

## Sinatra Tipped Well

Molli Swiatek

Sinatra tipped well. He was a show-off, a wise guy, a flirt--and he tipped well, unabashedly and undoubtedly on purpose. He tipped for people to see, for the pretty waitress to gasp at, and later giggle about with her friends over glasses of cheap white zinfandel in the comfort of her hole-in-the-wall apartment living room. He tipped sometimes, strangely enough, to be rude, to prove a point, to cause a stir. He tipped to be generous, because he was. He was incredibly generous, which not many people knew or know about the man. He would do anything for you, give anything to you, buy anything for you. Money? Sure. Free entry to his performance at the new, hip nightclub downtown? Okay. The coat off his back? Absolutely. He did to be kind, of course. He had the money, he lived in the moment, he wished to spend it. That's how he was.

I saw him do it one night, at a bar in St. Louis. The Summit, it was called. I had only met him a handful of times, when I was managing the nightclub he sang in regularly years before back in New York. It was in his early days, back before he was as hugely popular as he was when this incident took place right before my eyes. I was coming from the stadium; I had just seen my beloved Cardinals play a golden game with some of the boys, and we darted immediately into the bustling bar afterwards to celebrate, just because. Why not? It was a random Thursday, sure. But we managed to snag a high-top table right next to the bar and in the midst of yellers, laughers, smokers. It was a happy scene. And there he was.

He was sitting a little ways from our table, maybe 20 feet or so. Not far, easy enough to spot. Not easy enough for everyone in the place to recognize him, however. For one thing, he was sort of hunched over, which made sense given his worshiped status at the time. It was already packed in the bar, and would have become an absolute mob scene if the man was recognized. He didn't seem necessarily worried about that happening, but was trying to avoid it all the same. His suit was a dark gray, but he didn't have his usual hat, that distinctive "smart aleck" hat that set him apart. He was drinking something, looking contemplative but not sad. The fellas and I nudged each other, nodding in his direction. We were all fans, of course. How many nights had we played his stuff around our own houses, whether to introduce our kids to or enjoy a quiet evening with our wives over? It was a soundtrack for all of us, his music. We loved it. We heard stories about the guy, often. Even on the few occasions when I had been formally introduced to him, he had seemed either wildly exuberant and like your best friend, or rather short and gruff. You really never knew with Sinatra. But man, his music *moved*. It just took off running, even if it was slow. You were hooked, you couldn't turn the stuff off. And his charisma, when he felt like turning it on, was something out of this world completely. The man had charm. He was practicing that characteristic charm on the young brunette bartender at that very moment, whenever he looked up from being all hunched over and unobtrusive. It was clear that she was loving it, loving having him right there ordering his scotch from her with that twinkle in his eye. She was already preparing the best way to spin the story in the most dramatic light

*continued*

later, to make her friends drool and swoon with envy. (“...He reached over and touched my arm, and sort of rubbed it, and looked right at me, and asked for another please, sweetheart! *Sweetheart!*”) He was touching her arm lightly now, as a matter of fact, and saying something with a crooked half-smile that was making Miss Brunette Bartender’s head shake with laughter before she dashed off to retrieve whatever it was he so gentlemanly requested. Ah, a bowl of peanuts. Who would have thought. We all stole glances at him, every now and then, but eventually became uninterested and ordered our drinks and recounted the game we had just witnessed in exciting detail. About another hour passed. I went up to use the bathroom at one point, planning to pass Sinatra and maybe even be so bold as to make a comment to him, a sly congratulations on his success since those days in New York. Why shouldn’t I? I was in a great mood, it was a good night. I had helped him out back then, anyway. I had lent him use of my club. As I walked closer, however, I noticed that Mr. Sinatra was on his way out. I was right next to him, now, close enough to see the check on the bar in front of him. It wasn’t much, maybe 20, 30 bucks. Little Miss behind the bar had certainly shaved some of it off. He was trying to sneak out, that was obvious. But I saw, clearly, that he had *three* hundred dollar bills in hand, ready to place down with the check.

He saw, as I did, the group of young men, much younger than ourselves, beginning to notice him. They couldn’t have been much older than the legal age to get into the place; most likely, it was one of their first nights there, if not the actual first. They had been obnoxious the entire night, ordering more than several drinks and talking loudly about women they had been with, bragging and chortling. I noticed, just because I was paying attention, that Sinatra did not appreciate this. Immaturity seemed to be one thing he did not tolerate; I recalled this from New York, even. Sarcastic remarks about the crowds, side wisecracks about conversations he overheard. The man was a lot of things, but he was not undignified. The boys seemed to be getting quieter now, realizing the famous older man before them. One, however, a freckle-faced hotshot, was still boasting loudly, with cheeks flushed from the alcohol. He made a joke and laughed loudly at himself, and none of his comrades, this time, joined in. Sinatra cleared his throat, scowling. The hundreds were visible in his gloved hand.

“*Class*, boys. That’s how you win ‘em. You’ll never hang onto a dame if you haven’t got class. Shame.”

He took one slightly longer look at Freckle Face, winked at What’s-Her-Name, unsmiling and respectful, and turned on his heel. The hundreds he placed gingerly onto the countertop, in plain sight. Eyes widened. The boys were silent, now, humiliated. Freckles was frowning, confused but definitely impacted. I stifled a laugh. “Mr. Sinatra...” I began. But he was already right at the door, about to enter the brisk St. Louis evening, definitely uninterested in further conversation with anyone, after delivering the “life tip” that those baby boys were sure to never forget.

Sinatra tipped well--very well indeed.