

Brooklyn Barkeep

That is one of the things I like about Brooklyn.

Everyone is not expected to be like everyone else.

Carson McCullers

If the bar were in Manhattan, it would be a different story. Shana wouldn't need to exchange the same tired potshots with Ernie or look shocked every time Ellie wept into her fourth gin and tonic and retold how her husband fell from the scaffolding and broke his neck.

No. In Manhattan, her patrons would be well-heeled hosts entertaining clients or colleagues, with Broadway show tickets in their suit pockets worth a couple grand, and wives in spaghetti strap dresses showcasing their personal-trainer-toned arms. They'd blithely spend their million-a-year bonuses, while their tweens, snug at home in suburban villages like New Canaan or Scarsdale, crammed for prep school exams, snacking on the food the nanny delivered to them with the fluffy white dog traipsing after her.

In Manhattan, Shana would wipe water from the polished oak bar the second a glass sweated while the guests, giddy on two glasses of champagne, compared the benefits of leasing versus buying the Lexus. On alert, she would note the man air-scrolling for the bill. It printing, she'd check herself in the massive mahogany mirror, Windexed daily, surrounded with glass shelves of liquor bottles, their enticing colors glistening under the light of tiny, designer pendants, all of them—her, the bottles, their colors and light—reflecting off each other. She'd twist a pink-tinted tendril from her blond topnotch and hand him a new, antiseptically wiped bill holder. He'd pull a leather wallet from the breast pocket of his tailored jacket, thumbs rubbing

dozens of credit cards, while the women in their crisp frocks whipped their lacey shawls around their shoulders and headed for the ladies' room. She'd run his Amex Platinum and hand him his check, "Enjoy the show, Mr. Connelly!" she'd say. "We better. Tickets took a year. Have you seen it?" he'd ask, knowing the likelihood of her seeing the hottest show in town on barkeep's earnings was about as probable as his children failing to get into Yale. "I hear it's great," she'd answer. He'd lock his eyes on hers and give her that *I'd like to buy you* smile as he again thumbed through his wallet and slipped a crisp \$100 into the bill holder as if he were slipping it into her.

Snapping fingers brought her back.

"Earth to Shana," Ernie said.

"How many times I have to tell you?" she called down the bar. "It takes more than two fingers to make me come."

"My mug is empty!" he pouted and pounded his beer mug against the bar.

"Your mug is ugly!" Shana said, readjusting her senses to the dark cave, the pukey, beery smell, the clanking sound of pool balls. She retrieved a frosted mug from the frig below the bar and pulled the Budweiser draft.

"How do you know what I want?"

"I'd have to be brain-dead not to know. It's been a Bud draft for twenty years!" She poured off the head, topped off the mug, and banged it down in front of Ernie. She glanced back at herself in the mirror: no pink tendrils, no topnotch, just a few unmanageable gray wisps falling from her dirty-blond ponytail.

In Brooklyn, the blotchy bar mirror was cleaned once a month by the bar-back she'd sometimes obsess over for an illogical minute. Connor was tall, blond, and rosy-cheeked, his body young and tight. She liked his bouncy way and the shit he blathered on about that she could never entirely understand. He was from down South somewhere. Was it North Carolina? Or Georgia? Tennessee? Having lived in Queens as a kid and now Brooklyn, she could never keep those states straight, all one big borderless melting mess of genteel nothingness, leathery men in golf pants and sneering women in sun bonnets sipping Mint Juleps on the veranda. Connor was twenty years her junior, and her feelings for him wavered between something weirdly motherly, like she wanted to swaddle him in a blue blanket and rock him to sleep, to something slightly more titillating that she immediately forced from her mind, until she didn't.

No. Here in Brooklyn, her nights didn't go anything like she dreamed they would in Manhattan. The laughter didn't carry a trace of giddiness, and the chatter was more about what people didn't have than what they had. They weren't stopping for a drink on their way to be entertained. Their entertainment was in the glass in front of them.

Occasionally, a young crowd, carding age, would take over and run the regs out. They'd line up to take selfies in front of the yellowing poster that read, "We're here because we're not all there." Shana, curious about what drew them, had googled the bar. One Yelp reviewer wrote, "Love it! a gin-joint straight out of the fifties complete with surly barkeep." She was snarly on those nights. She worked her ass off and took home barely enough for her Uber.

But there were no kids that night, and only one or two regulars left.

Connor stocked the bar then said, "I have a friend in town. Mind if I leave early?"

"Sure, I'm about to give last call anyway," she said.

“You’ll be okay by yourself?”

“Yeah, go see your friend. Carlos is still here.”

The next afternoon when coming on her shift, the wine salesman with shiny black hair was waiting. Frank? Was that his name? Now that this last hold-out block near the expressway and the ramshackle piers had gentrified, wine dealers roamed from bar to restaurant. The owner, Jake, wasn't in and would be useless even if he were. "Don't like the taste of the stuff," was his go-to review, and if a customer drank wine in this bar with an order more descriptive than the color, they were slumming for a night. The wine salesman had already taken the liberty to line up several bottles along the bar. Connor must have let him in.

She liked wine tastings with Connor. They'd get a buzz on and crank up the music and dance-work their way through set-up. Her favorites were soul and reggae, his hip-hop and techno. Straight-up blues and Afropop were their commonalities. They liked bullshitting the salespeople into bringing their finest bottles. "You have a very sophisticated palette," a female dealer (Pat?) had said after she had complimented their most expensive bottle. Shana smirked, envisioning a tiny artist in a Beret dabbing the inside of her mouth with paint.

"Be right there," Shana said, ducking into one of the two grubby gender-neutral bathrooms in the back, Carlos taking his daily crap in the other. Jakes' had gender-neutral bathrooms before they were cool. Some construction workers a decade earlier got drunk and unscrewed the “Ladies” and “Gents” signs off the doors one night, walking out with them.

Shana fiddled the hook into the wobbly latch. One good butt thrust or drunken lean, and it would fly open. At least once a week, some woman on the toilet would screech, "Shut the damned door," or she'd catch a peek of some man mid-piss, dick in hand.

She changed from her flowery, purple peasant blouse into the royal blue t-shirt with the yellow decal, "Jake's Place," printed in red. She had washed it in the sink and ironed it just before running for the bus that afternoon. She appreciated that it was still damp against her skin. It was stifling and sticky outside and not much different here.

"Fix the fucking AC," she told Jake the night before, "or I'll tend bar in my underwear."

"You want to scare them off?" he said.

Years earlier, same threat, he had replied, "That's one way to fill the bar."

Shana looked at herself in the mirror. She looked good for forty-four. She had her father's soft skin, not pinched and wrinkled like her mother's. When she first took this job, her mother curled her lip, "Just the kind of dump your father chose over us!" Shana shook her head, then gathered the stubborn curls she'd inherited from her mother into a ponytail. Maybe that pink tint she'd fantasized about would be just the right thing, a gift to herself for her 45th.

Connor passed her carrying a tray of wine glasses when she left the bathroom.

In a rush to move on to bigger fish, the wine salesman started pouring as soon as Connor placed glasses in front of him. "The main anchor for this blend is Cabernet," he said.

Connor pulled out a barstool for Shana and sat behind her. They sipped the wine.

"Hey, I made a playlist for you," Connor said.

"For me? Let me guess," Shana said. "You're going to torture me with gangster rap?"

"Would *I* do that to *you*?" he said.

Shana nodded, twirled her fingers around her ponytail, and chugged the wine in her glass.

"Now, this lighter Pinot Noir has been aged in oak barrels, which adds to the structure —"

"Besides, gangster rap is misogynistic crap," Connor said.

"Tell the owner he could retail both wines for around \$14 a glass." The salesman flipped out a business card from the pocket of his khakis. "Have him call me," he said.

"Sure will," Shana said, looking at the card, "uh, Frank." She was right. His name was Frank. Why did she always doubt herself? She froze in fear whenever she forgot anything, even the most inconsequential. Her mother had died five years earlier of Alzheimer's. By the time her mother turned sixty, she couldn't remember the name she'd given her only child.

Shana re-corked the wine and shoved the bottles under the bar. She'd pour herself a glass in a coffee mug around ten and then take the rest back to her studio, crank up the air-conditioner, and finish it off. Even her Friday night regs chose not to bake in Jake's on scorching nights. She'd be closed by midnight.

But, that night, well, morning, a group of loud twenty-somethings had arrived at midnight, and it was nearly 3 am by the time Shana shuffled the last drunk out the door. She was counting the cash, about to head for the safe in Jake's downstairs office, when Connor came up the stairs carrying a box of assorted liquor. She felt his eyes. She turned. He was holding the heavy crate over his head with one arm. He had changed out of Jake's t-shirt uniform into his street clothes. The jagged-cut, sleeveless powder-blue shirt accented his guns, the type she found non-threatening, basketball player, rather than weight-lifter, ilk.

"Hey," she held out an open bottle from the afternoon. "Want to?"

"Sure!"

After finishing the first bottle gossiping about Jake, and the regs, the topic turned to Professor T., the drunk who often swayed up just before last call, smelling of pee and the corner trash barrel. Professor T. rarely spoke to anyone except himself, which he did with abandon in his upper-crust Boston accent earning him the professor title. The T, short for trash, referred to the pungent odor he left in his wake. Connor would sometimes sit on the stool next to him, carrying on a conversation and siphoning him away from her.

"What do you and Professor T. talk about?" Shana asked.

"Philosophers," Connor said.

"Yeah, I overheard something about Nietzsche hating Socrates," Shana said.

"You know Nietzsche?"

"Not personally."

"No interest?"

"It irks me. Bunch of men sitting around conjuring up the meaning of life while the womenfolk scrub their shit-pots, feed and dress their asses," Shana said.

Connor laughed.

"Raising their snotty-nosed brood," she added.

"There are women philosophers."

"Like who?"

“Simone de Beauvoir.”

“She’s a philosopher?”

“Of sorts. Ever read her?”

“I remember some quote of hers I saw somewhere, something like *the body is not a thing, it’s a situation*. I don’t get it, but it stuck with me.”

“I’ll bring you some of her writing.”

Shana was resting her elbow on the bar, hand on her cheek, eyes on his. His eyes sparkled even in the bar cave. Were they that blue? Really?

"You want to try the \$60 bottle?" she asked. She planned it for her Monday off. She'd roll a joint, take a late afternoon stroll to the Promenade to watch the sunset backlight the Statue of Liberty. At home, she'd pour herself a glass, or four, and catch up on Forensic Files and American Greed. Something soothed her about watching criminals caught.

"As a male philosopher, of course, I'd like nothing more than having a woman keep my wine glass full," he said. "Might you have grapes to feed me while you're at it?"

Shana rolled her eyes and pushed herself from the barstool. She wiggled. Her butt still tight and firm. Jake had once said, "It's your best ass-et!" She answered, "Good thing you're not my boss on Wall Street. I'd sue your ass, and my ass-et would walk with millions."

In those days, Jake was still a looker with a gym body he didn't deserve, a wicked twinkle in his eyes, and a frequent bulge in his pants. Particularly bulgy when he slithered behind Shana at the bar and leaned in while some patron was chatting her up. Her mother's deteriorating mind consumed Shana's time outside work back then, so she enjoyed the tease, her only outlet.

She'd come to work wearing short crop jeans that fell below her belly-button ring and showed a slim slice of her cheekbones in the back. Somewhere along the line, Jake's wife came into an *inheritance* from some *distant aunt* who turned out to be a man with a yacht. Nowadays, Jake's shoulders slumped, his belly jutted, and his hair, still black, thanks to *Just for Men*, was thinning. Shana and Jake were old war buddies. They'd seen some shit and survived.

When Shana returned carrying the Cabernet and two clean glasses, she said "viola" and scooted her stool slightly closer to Connor. He didn't budge. They sipped and nodded, affirming the taste. The only sounds were the steady buzz of the refrigeration and the hum of lights.

"Now I know why it costs so much," Shana said.

"Yes, quite superb," Connor said. He straightened his back and held his head aloof. "I taste notes of dark chocolate and raspberries. Don't you?"

"Why, of course," Shana said, "and the subtlest dash of black pepper."

They laughed, clinked, and swigged. Connor lowered his shoulders to their boyish slump.

"What *did* you study in school?" she said.

"History and Philosophy."

"I was studying psychology before I dropped out," Shana said. "Junior year."

"I might as well have dropped out for all the good it did me. Why did you?"

"Long story. My father suffered from depression, and —" Shana stopped. Connor looked at her. "My mother couldn't pay my tuition. I had to get a job." She swept her arms too wide, "So here I am!"

They clinked again. He stared. His eyes were glassy, as if he, too, could see her father slumped over in the straight-backed chair, his belt around his neck, their shaggy Snoodle on his lap, licking his face trying to rouse him.

"But seriously," she said, "psychology should be a required course in every bartending school curriculum."

Connor held his finger to his lip and rubbed it back and forth as if contemplating something. He smiled.

"What does one with a history and philosophy major do?" Shana asked.

"Bar-back," he said, gesturing behind the bar but looking at her.

Shana snorted and sucked a loose strand of hair into her mouth. He reached and pushed it back. Her cheek tingled, and she clasped his fingers. Cupping her face, he kissed her, his face like baby skin. The sweat from his temples dripped onto their lips. She licked his saltiness.

"I wasn't expecting that," she said.

"Me either," he said, "does it bother you?"

"I've always had a policy never to sleep with anyone here."

"Well, we aren't sleeping," he said, drawing her off the stool, strapping his legs around hers, "I promise we aren't sleeping."

At 7 am, when Shana returned home and stripped out of her jeans, she sniffed her forearms and hands, relishing still his smell, sweat and faint cologne she had never noticed him

wearing before. She recounted each move, each touch, the way he turned her against the bar, made them come together, *wait, wait, wait for me*, he had said.

She slept deeply, awakened wet and wanting, and indulged herself, remembering his touch. She ran her fingers through her tangled hair, tugging, yanking it as he had, reliving the sudden smarting, prickly release.

The smell of Connor's cologne on her shoulders prompted her to rise from bed with an anticipation she had not felt for years. She shook the perfume bottles scattered across her dresser, all empty. She recalled Harold's old Christmas gift and searched her closet.

Harold had sat at her bar for a string of Fridays eight years earlier. The first time he came, Shana had Ella cranked up.

"Good music," he said when she served his second drink. He left her a \$10 spot.

"Hope to see you again," she said. She didn't know why. She never said that. Maybe his gray hair, a daddy desire that skulked her since her father checked out a week before her twentieth birthday. The following Friday, Harold returned at sunset. Standing at the end of the empty bar, she watched the first snow dance under the streetlights. He brushed flakes from his dress coat and slipped his wedding ring into his pocket. She filled a highball glass with ice.

"Vodka tonic?" She held up the glass as he settled on a barstool farthest from the door.

"Sure," he said. "I didn't know I was that memorable."

He arrived at the same time each Friday, drank two vodka tonics, and left her \$10.

On Christmas Eve, he was carrying a holiday bag. Shana was playing a tape of Ella and Satchmo's Christmas duets. She knew he'd appreciate it as much as she did.

"My work's sending me to London," he said.

"I'll miss you," Shana said.

"You will?"

"Sure, you're my Friday night regular," she said. "We have the same taste in music."

When he finished his second vodka tonic, she was pulling pints for Georgia and Mic, an old married couple, happy-hour regulars. He nodded when he passed. She saw the gift bag sitting on the bar and called to him. But he was gone. Inside was a Victoria's Secret *Pure Seduction* Gift Set of perfume and bath gel and a card with fifty dollars. The card read, *Dear Shana, I wish I'd known you sooner. All good things, Harold.*

She closed the bar early that Christmas Eve. Back at her studio in the bowels of Gowanus near the canal, she placed Harold's gift on the dresser top—her sole gift besides her \$100 bonus. Jake hadn't even bothered with a cheap-ass card. He counted out five twenties, slapped them on her bar, and hollered "Merry Christmas" as he left her to close.

Shana remembered forcing herself to visit her mother's nursing home that Christmas afternoon. She didn't know why she bothered. At that point, her mother didn't recognize her and could no longer talk. That part was positive. Shana would no longer have to endure her mother calling her father "a do-nothing" or accusing her of having "loose morals." She looked at Harold's gift, wiped her eyes, and tossed it into her closet. Over the years, it became buried beneath a pile of things she intended to discard someday and never did. But now, she dug it out and ran a sudsy tub of *Pure Seduction* bath gel. While dressing, she unwrapped the perfume bottle and dabbed enough on her neck, breasts, and panties to outlast a sweaty shift and cling to

Connor the way his smell had to her. She dressed in the red halter top clasped at her neck and envisioned him unbuckling it and letting it drop.

Opening the door to Jake's, she imagined Connor would be there stocking the bar. He wasn't. She checked her appearance in the bar mirror. Her cheeks were pink and glowing. She waited to hear his footsteps on the stairs. He'd be carrying a rack of glasses, one-armed, above his head again. They'd give each other a knowing smile. He'd put on the playlist he had mixed for her. She heard a light tap on the locked door. It wasn't the first time he'd been late. His hair would still be wet from the shower. Something about a man with wet hair... She turned to find Ernie passing by, giving her a wave. She stuck out her tongue.

Okay. He must be downstairs. What was taking him so long? She went downstairs. Carlos was standing at the dishwasher. He pushed a rack of clean glasses at her.

"Donde esta, Connor?" she said.

"No se," he shrugged.

She hauled the glasses upstairs, set up her bar, and went into the bathroom to change into her bartending shirt. Still no Connor. She called Jake.

"Did Connor call in?" she said. There was a pause.

"Nope. Kids are so fucking irresponsible," he said.

"I'll call him," she said. "Last night was long. You have his number?"

"Look on my desk," Jake said. "You can't reach him. I'll come in."

"Yeah, I can't do a Saturday night alone," she said.

Shana shuffled through the mess on Jake's desk until she found a half-completed application with the name Connor Collins on the top. No address. A cellphone number only. She dialed the number. It went straight to voicemail, a loud hip-hop recording: *Do anything for clout. They do anything for clout. Do anything for clout.* She dialed again—same thing.

She filled two ice buckets and got Carlos to help her drag them upstairs and fill the wells. She cut the fruit and put the juices on ice. Connor had restocked the rail with well liquors and the dog house behind the bar with the call liquors the night before. She never worried about the top-shelf liquors; they were there to gather dust. Shana wiped the bar where she and Connor had been drinking. The white rag turned red and sticky from the wine they'd spilled. Where the fuck was he? What if he never made it home last night? Got mugged? She could see him wandering back to Williamsburg just before daybreak, dazed and drunk, vulnerable. He had leaned into the Uber, kissed her long and hard, licked his lips, then said, "I'll walk. You took my breath away. I need the air." Her last image was his silhouette against the violet sky. He had his earplugs in and was skipping and clicking his heels in the air as if in a Fred Astaire movie, the kind her mother loved. Even when she stopped recognizing Shana, she could sing every word.

With her bar set up, Shana went to the safe to count out \$150 from last night's till to start her shift. She reached in and felt around. She must have pushed it back farther than usual. She squatted. The safe was empty. Jake hadn't mentioned retrieving it, and he would have surely left her enough to start the shift. She remembered counting it, close to \$800. She searched the counters, Jake's desk, behind the bar. Empty.

Shana stuck her head out of Jake's office, "Carlos, usted vio Jake?"

"No."

"Estaba aqui hoy?"

"No se."

Connor never returned. Shana offered to pay Jake back.

"I'd rather lose a night's take than you. Money can be replaced. Loyalty is hard to come by." He squeezed her tight shoulders.

Late fall, Shana's day off, she headed for a bar in Williamsburg where her friend Shirley bartended. The streets were packed with Brooklynites soaking up the sun before winter. A young, pretty woman swished by, swinging a book. It caught Shana's eye. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Simone du Beauvoir. And there he was, Connor, his arm around the woman's waist. She ran to catch him and grabbed his shoulder, but when he faced her, it wasn't him. The man jerked his shoulder free and brushed it as if she had dirty hands.

"Sorry," Shana said, "I thought you were someone I once knew."

At Shirley's empty bar, she drank a glass of red, and they laughed about the men they'd seen leave the bar with women they hadn't given a second glance at when the night was young.

"Men will fuck anything!" Shirley said.