

## Work Night

Sweat dripped off of my forehead. It landed in the drink glass, unnecessarily adding to the taste of the gin and tonic. I took a towel, wiped her forehead and continued mixing drinks and taking money. Tonight the bar was crowded, especially given that it was not a weekend night.

All night long, I had not had to lie to boring or creepy customers. A man walked in, ordered a drink, and handed me a tip, bigger than necessary. He leaned over the bar, and began to talk about my pretty face. I politely said, “I have other customers to help” and moved on.

I had pulled out my phone to check instagram at least two dozen times that night. The page I checked was documenting a cocktail tour of Brooklyn. The account had 340,000 followers. The account was maintained by various foodies. One of them was making their way toward my bar. The posts had begun in Greenpoint and had worked their way down. Hopefully his or her liver had held out and they would stop by my bar. I wondered if the poster was not actually drinking alcohol at all. I had made a few drinks that had been returned or not needed when an expected guest never came. I had sipped on them slowly to not waste myself when I needed to be sharpest for promotional opportunities.

Often, the bartender was tagged with a thanks. I could see hazily, the tag, “@alannam made this, highly recommend!” The account searched out Russian cocktails and my family was Russian. Getting a tag from the account would send Alanna’s fame with all of New York City into the stratosphere.

I shook cocktail after cocktail, thrilling to each well made drink I served. I had no expecting customer for a few seconds. I looked around the bar. The wooden roof, the pale lights hung from the ceiling, proudly asymmetrically and lopsidedly. The bar was cool, often buzzing with young people who loved life, or at least loved complaining about life. But the bar was also a job, a reminder to me that I was serving people who still had dreams and new cities and rising paychecks and exciting new people to meet. I, on the other hand, had failed at enough things, been laughed out of enough casting rooms, that I no longer dreamed. I looked forward only to routine, not to new roller coasters, not to risking failure.

Tonight was special. The world of insta and tik tok, of international men and women of food reviewing mystery was coming to her. Tonight I could get lucky, make a good cocktail and be a name that everyone on instagram knew, and not a backstage employee, helping the players of the city get their drinks.

A very tall woman with platinum blonde hair approached the bar and asked for a Vodka soda. Her accent was foreign, Austrian? Swiss? German? Her nails seemed to span feet as she reached for her pocketbook, and then inside for her wallet.

“Tell me how the drink is, honestly” I said. “Someone is coming to the bar to try the drinks. I want your opinion on the tartness, sweetness, everything.” The woman nodded down at me and said, “Okay, I will have a sip and tell you what I think.”

“Thanks, I’m sure you have had a lot of drinks and haven’t had to pay for many.” The blonde woman’s face frowned a little. She had the haughty appearance of a queen judging the devoted thanks of her subjects.

“No, men never buy me drinks. I am too tall and scary.”

I did not believe her. I prepared another margarita. If that woman was telling the truth, that meant there was a kind of bell curve of attractiveness. If you were 4'11" with crossed eyes, men would be physically repulsed by you. If you were 6'1" with slavic super features, you were a nightmare, an instigator of insecurity. Women had to be approachable and inviting, also mysterious and worth working for. I was in between the extremes, in height and attractiveness. She had none of the required qualities, though.

I went back to shaking and filling glasses. My forehead and armpits were becoming uncomfortably sweaty again. Margaritas were ordered more frequently than anything else. "Blueberry margarita with a blueberry twist" said a curly haired woman as she laughed with her friend with glasses. I found margaritas tedious to make. I felt constrained creatively. Agave and tequila and citrus always tasted good, I had no work to do, and no subtle adjustments or ingredients to add that would be perceptible.

"Dead end job, you are in a dead end job." This thought ran through my head regularly. It did not pass through my consciousness, a quarantined fear, harmless paranoia. It touched all of the other thoughts I had. Did I deserve to live in the most creative city in the world if I was heading toward nothing, had no project to build to? Why should I make an effort to look nice, or purposely not nice, provocatively nasty and rebellious? After all, the other girls who saw me, on the street or at the bar, knew I am headed nowhere? Did I deserve a charismatic, creative, good looking young man if I was not providing evidence of those qualities in myself?

The solution to this sapping of my mental strength was to focus on my small jobs, my cocktails, my cat, and make them nice, pour love into them. I needed to touch the cold glass before handing it to a customer. I needed to see my healthily fed cat curled up sleeping. I needed to see evidence that I was competent to do the jobs I was doing. I needed to see the

smiles of my cat, of my customers, and know that I had made their lives a little better. In those moments, I was not a problem, a disappointment in the family line.

A short, pitch black haired woman approached the bar, eyes flirting with everyone around her. Through the sea of 25 year olds with self-conscious posture and awkwardly held cocktail glasses, this 60 year old free spirit stands out. Her black, gauzy costume suggests a witchy presence, bewitching to goths and Brooklynites, hopelessly out of date to most 21st century people. She reaches my section of the bar table.

“I would like a glass of prosecco.” The “s”, the short vowels sound familiar to me from my grandparents home. The slavic accent is like a warm hand on my heart, slowing it, warming it. The account is not run by a cold, discerning man at all. There is no Gordon Ramsay swearing and no mocking comments about the prices at the no class bar in Brooklyn. This little old lady who wants a good wine and whose children likely look like me is reviewing me. Whew! Cocktail mixing acclaim, here it comes!

The woman reached out a short, old, hand, nails dyed purple. She took the wine glass from me and sighed as she lifted it to her lips. Her eyes closed and she tilted the glass of cool, bubbly liquid back.

“This is not bubbly and cool, not at all. I am adding a bad review tonight.”

The woman turned abruptly. I stared after her. The happy story that I had written, that the ink was still fresh on in my mind, was collapsing. It was not still collapsing, it had collapsed.

“The woman was a bitch, terrible.”

A sweaty, middle aged man shouldered his way to the bar. He was of medium build and not very tall, but had an aggressive and confident presence. He moved with purpose in mind, even to a bar stool. His eyes fixed on me and he ordered.

He took his Martini in one hand and looked around the bar.

“Thanks, I’ll give you a good review on my page. The blonde woman likes your drink and she is staying here.”

“Do you like my drink?”

“I can’t drink it, I am full. I have gone to every bar she has gone to tonight.”

I went to the bathroom and pulled out my phone. The account had been updated with a glowing review of my bar service and mentioned me by name. The accomplishment meant nothing if it was a result of a desperate guy. The cold of the bathroom wall tile pressed into my face as I leaned into the finish line, the end of a dream. I was tired. “Maybe”, I thought. “Maybe tomorrow I could feel happy about a good review that reached hundreds of thousands on Instagram. Maybe tomorrow I would not dislike the man who had come into the bar so much.”

I scooted behind the bar again. Home again. I still had another hour of my shift. Then I would go home and collapse.

I prepared margarita after margarita with my brain half asleep.

The tall blonde woman approached the bar again. I looked at her eyes closely. Was she relieved that the old man had recently left? Had she had to reject him? I had no opinion on this woman, she seemed extraordinary in an ordinary way. Her looks had produced a long chain of events tonight, but she was still so dry and unmoving. I could feel nothing about her.

“Hi, I’d like a glass of water.”

“Sure.” I filled a glass and handed it over. I watched her sip. She looked cold and icy, even sighing at the relaxing cold water. Her half smile at me seemed more strained than warm. It was something in her bones. A few inches of cheekbone structure that lead men on chases through whole cities, spending hundreds on drinks.

“What’s your name?”

“Sylvan.”

“I’m Alanna, would you like to talk in the corner after my shift is over?”

“I’m going soon, but I’m staying just a few blocks away. You can come by. My address is 213 Driggs ave. apt 17.”

“Great, see you in half an hour.”

I knocked and the door opened quickly.

Sylvan’s apartment was mostly empty. There were some silky European linens hanging from the ceiling and walls. Was this minimalism? Was it refinement? Was it lazy? I could not judge. It was foreign to me, whatever it was.

“So, how was the night behind the bar? You have a very social job, you seem to connect with people. I can’t do it, I lose vocabulary around others. I can talk to my family. We have inside jokes, a language, you know.” Sylvan said this casually.

“Oh.” a pause. Alanna was surprised by the gushing vulnerability, delivered in monotone, perfect diction, Swiss accent making English sound classier than any English speaker.

“Oh yeah, me too, me too. I am around people at the bar so I’ve learned hipster language, you know. But I don’t really talk in mother tongue to anyone. My friends are friendly to get free drinks. Men are friendly to get free drinks too.”

“Yeah, men are friendly to me to get sex. They think I am stupid and I can never convince them otherwise.”

“You know, you are actually the reason my dreams came true tonight. An old man came to the bar trying to talk to you and left me a good review because you liked my drink and stayed. He is an influencer, wine critic, you know, instagram.”

“Oh yes, he followed me to many bars tonight, he talked to me at yours and I said no.”

I touched my new acquaintance lightly on the shoulder. My doughy, pale, city hand touched the soft, finely tanned then creamed then whitened skin. Sylvan’s dress was pitch black, setting off her glowing forearms. I reached parallel from my shoulders and made contact with Sylvan’s arms. Our fingers touched. The physical act was natural, it followed the confessions of emotional dissatisfaction. Was it an affirmation of new friendship? A comforting between two strangers that there were other lonely people out there? I wondered. I knew it felt nice.

“Well, I got something out of it.”

Sylvan and I took seltzers and went up to the rooftop to non-alcoholically sip the night away.