

On the Rocks by Sarah O'Connor

The bartender slides my change against the counter and into his palm, drops the coins into the till and closes it hard. I watch him make my drink: the slow amber pour of the whiskey, ice cubes cracking on contact, the addition of the bitters, plop of an orange slice and cherry, and then he slides it to me without spilling a drop. He doesn't look at me, just goes back to wiping the counter, pours more drinks and shots and hands them to the other thirsty customers who return to their tables where their friends are waiting. I look at myself in the mirror behind the bar and snap a selfie. I wonder if he can smell the tourist on me, the smog and steel of home.

Probably just the alcohol.

The door opens and a cold wind slices through. The bartender does a double take, his brow furrows and he shouts, "He's not allowed in here!" And I turn, wondering if a bar fight's going to happen, but when I look over my shoulder it's to find a man in his mid-forties laughing because he's just set a thick-furred cat onto the floor. The bartender walks over, opens the door and the cat leaves. He returns to his place behind the bar and I imagine joking about how he should have let the little guy stay, ask if he was kicked out because he was underage. But I'm no regular. I hardly know who I am alone, wasn't even supposed to be here alone. But that just makes me think of Gabby, which just makes me sadder than I already am. I swallow the hurt in my throat with some of my drink, trick myself into thinking that another drink will help, like I trick myself into doing a lot of things. I let the ice hit my teeth when I reach the bottom, swallow them too so nothing's missed and place more change on the counter. Gabby would be disappointed, but I've disappointed more than enough people by now to stop caring, to disguise its taste with something old fashioned.

In movies there's always some creep who sides up to the girls at the bar, talks to them about how lonely they look and offers to buy them a drink. It used to happen to me, with my old group of friends. I could usually snag us a few free drinks, but it doesn't happen to me here. I wonder if I'm finally starting to look my age or if I just wear loneliness well. When I look at myself in the bar mirror I see a woman trying to distract herself, an empty glass and a half-filled one beside her cell phone that she keeps clicking on to see the minutes pass, who can't even handle looking at her own reflection because it looks so pathetic.

The music thumps through the walls as I sip my next drink, careful not to spill as a group of tourists come in, and order a round of shots. In my head I call them kids which only goes to prove my age, they must be in their early twenties, graduates travelling to the Yukon in September. God knows why. One of them drapes an arm around my neck and leans in close, fresh vodka on his breath, "You're alone?" I nod. "You'll dance with us!" He turns towards his friends with a grin so wide I wonder how it doesn't hurt his face. His friends give kind but sober smiles, none of us intending on knowing each other past this drunken exchange. The graduates take their friend and wander over to the next room to dance, I watch them leave and when I turn back the world spins, slowly focuses where I find another drink in front of me, hear the bartender drag more of my change into the till. I don't remember finishing the last one but the glass sits empty beside me, and this one's more generous than the last, filled right to the brim, nearly overflowing. I lean down towards it and kiss it, sip until it's lowered.

"Kind of late to be here on holiday." I look up to see the bartender, glancing at me as he stacks the students shot glasses. I must look pathetic if he feels he has to make conversation with me.

I shrug and hope my words don't sound too slurred, "I was supposed to be here earlier. I was going to work in the hotel, the toe one." I can't remember the name, take out the cherry from one of my finished drinks and dunk it into my fresh one and pretend it's a toe. The bartender nods like he gets it, and I'm at the point where I've drunk enough that I trust him even though he's a stranger, where I want to tell him everything even though there's so much I don't want to say. But the words just sort of flow out like there's no better place for them to be than in this bartender's ears.

"My best friend works here every summer, she loves it and was always bugging me to go and work with her for a season because I'm not a very exciting person, you know? Or I was once when we went to school, and after we went to school. I was exciting for too long if you know what I mean, and that wasn't very good. Couldn't keep a job," I fish out the cherry and place it gently on the counter. "So now I'm sober." My throat closes at that and I look at my half empty drink, feel my eyes get wet. "Was." I down it. "So I finally got a job up here and we had it all planned. I was going to help people drink toes and Gabby was going to keep dancing-"

"Gabs? From Gerties?" the bartender calls her by a different name and his face stretches into a smile as I nod. People always smiled for Gabby. "I know Gabs!"

"You do?" And I feel all jumbled inside, like vodka and wine trying to mix.

"She used to go upstairs to do her make-up before the show. She'd come here after some of the shows too. That girl never stops dancing!" He shakes his head as if this isn't the darnedest thing, "I was wondering where she was this season. How's she doing?"

And I hate that he calls her by a different name than I do, like he knows her better than me and I want to yell at him or throw something because how dare he know her and have memories

of her that I don't have. I stand up too quickly, end up knocking my drink so it spills all down the counter and onto the floor. I could cry at that, which makes me want to cry harder.

He looks at me for a moment in a way that looks too much like Gabby when she'd pick me up from some club or bar I'd find myself in after my parents gave up on me. He tries to hide it like she did but it's there just below the surface, that anger, the exhaustion of having to take care of a person like me. I leave before he can lie and say that it's fine, that he does this all the time, that he doesn't mind cleaning up after me. I leave because how do I tell him that she's gone when just thinking of her puts a smile on his face? Who would be cruel enough to take his smile away? When I'd have to tell him that I don't know why she did it but I want to know why but not really, not fully, just enough so that it makes some sense about why she isn't here anymore.

I sway through the streets crying and cross my arms over my stomach, stare up at the dark sky and watch the clouds flicker in the oddest of ways before I realize they're the Northern Lights. They look pale, white, not the vibrant green in the pictures Gabby always used to send me, fifty at a time some nights because she loved them so much. I follow their dance because I'm drunk and a lightweight now and Gabby would hate me because she did hate me sometimes until she helped me get better, hated me like the bartender hates me for spilling the drink all over the counter. But now the alcohol sits heavy in my stomach, to the brim, overfilled so that it sloshes at the back of my throat. The phantom pains of a hangover wait for me in the morning and Gabby isn't even here to hate me for it, which should make me feel better except I'd do anything for Gabby to be back, even if it meant she hated me.

I stumble onto the boardwalk hard and vomit, everything inside of me flows out in sick black bile onto the muddy road until my stomach stops hurting. I feel a pressure against my side, look to see the thick-furred cat flop onto its back beside me. I scratch its head and ask, "Did you

know her too?” And the cat stretches while I stare up at the lights, the cold air blows through all the hollow places that are left now that I’m empty.

I remember the first time Gabby left for Dawson, how she’d read all she could about this little town that used to be the capital of the Yukon. She told me that sometimes it floods in Dawson, that in 1979 it was one of the worst floods and that with climate change and everything they were predicting another one would come sooner than expected. She seemed excited by the idea, was actually smiling when I asked, “So you want it to flood?”

“No,” and I remember her sighing, remember how she bent her dancer’s leg close to her chest and rested her chin on her knee. “I just want it to be exciting.”

And for a moment in my head she is so clear that I think I could touch her, think she could hear me, believe I could apologize for who I am without her and who I was with her and how sorry I am. Sorry that I could never help her, that I never saw her when she always saw me so clearly. I bury my hands into the cat’s fur as it purrs and purrs, a vibration through my palm and look up at the sky, at the lights that still dance over Dawson even though Gabby is no longer here to see them.