

Another

By: Anna Avent

She sits with her back hunched over the bar. Her blazer taut under the seat so it stretches tightly across the surface of her back. The purple leather protrudes over the arch of her spine as if the bones lay atop her skin, creating a jigsaw of cartilage. Her elbows sit stung into the counter's sticky surface, leaving a film of muddled alcohol on the elbow's peaks. Above the elbows and past her veiny forearms sits her face propped up by her knuckles. The look on her face communicates something of victimhood, like the makeup atop her skin begs to be pardoned. Her foundation, a film of greased pigment. Whenever she is anxious or upset she licks the rim of her lips leaving a pale circle of saliva showing where her real skin ends and where the foundation begins. Zoe knows that this habit constitutes her looking like a child, drooling for God knows what reason, but she refuses to stop, she's done it since childhood.

The hotel bar is dimly lit, not for the effect of the atmosphere but rather due to the flickering light bulb hung over the array of Kirkland brand liquor bottles. Under the pulsing light, the bartender wipes the bar from one end till she meets her in the center.

"What can I do for you?" the bartender asks, looking up briefly from her cleaning to flash a staged smile. The bartender's hair is slicked away from her face in a ponytail of golden silk.

"Gin and tonic," Zoe says.

"You got it."

The bartender whips her back around to scour the bar's shelves. As the bartender is turned around, Zoe observes her body: skinny neck, locked shoulders, lengthy arms, tall back, womanly hips, average thighs. By observing, Zoe notices the contortion of her body and straightens her spine before the bartender can turn around and hand her the drink.

“Here you go love,” she says quickly, sliding a napkin underneath the drink and placing it in front of Zoe.

“Thank you,” says Zoe, “So where are you-” Before she can finish the bartender looks up to see a woman in a sleek trench coat approaching the bar.

“LIN!” she calls out, stuffing her sticky rag into her apron pocket and walking to meet the other woman.

“I’m back baby!” Lin says, pulling her knit beanie off the top of her blonde bob. Zoe contorts her back again to stare down the bar and watch the two women embrace. Her first thought is to look away, to not invade their space yet, she doesn’t want to, she wants to keep looking, looking until they catch her gaze in the corner and ask her what her problem is. It reminds Zoe of the many instances in which she doesn’t avert her gaze. In the grocery store aisle, staring at a mother and her screaming child in the hopes of humiliating the woman and her anklebiter. Or in the movie theater, when the moviegoers rest their feet on her armrest, turning her back to stare, until she even scares herself. It’s not typical for Zoe to scare herself, she’s usually too busy scaring everyone around her.

When Zoe was 16 she had her first encounter with the backstabbing force of being unwanted. It happened in the local YMCA which was also connected to the public library, the only thing dividing the two being a long light blue windowless hallway that looked like what she’d imagined the walkway to an ICU. At the public library, they had a cafe that sold pre-packaged pastries and acidic room-temperature coffee. Anytime Zoe went to the library she would order at least five pre-packaged chocolate chip muffins and eat them all whilst reading a magazine about girlhood or celebrity pop culture. The titles of the magazine flashing headlines titled, “100 BEST SEX TIPS” or “DIRTY SEX TALK (LEARN HOW TO DO IT WITHOUT

SOUNDING SILLY!). After her leisure reading she would force herself to go to the YMCA lap pool to make up for the fact that she had stuffed 1,985 calories worth of muffin in her face. She hated the locker rooms. To avoid them she always wore her one-piece underneath her clothes to simply peel them off her body at the pool's side before jumping in with the hopes that she would go unnoticed. "Even if the pool drains start to suck me towards the bottom," she thought, "Just let me drown." To be sure she didn't pull any attention she would swim most of the laps fully underwater only coming up when she would feel the water trickling into her lungs. In one instance when she was 16, she was underwater swimming her final lap. Breaking the water's surface and taking a deep breath in, she opened her eyes to find herself in a limitless void of black, the only thing illuminating the room being a faint red exit sign. The pool was closed, she realized. They had left her there, in the pool, completely alone.

Zoe has always been unfortunately self-aware of her ever-present ruining. Through the very vessel of her body being in a room comes the gratuitous actions of her presence. She takes a sip of her drink fiending for the heat of its swallow to take over her entire body and distract her from the fact that she is all but distracting. Zoe knows she does not mean much to anyone. Let alone anyone in this bar.

"Where have you been?" asks the bartender, setting a hand on Lin's shoulder.

The conversation carries on and Zoe listens to it in its entirety under the serenation of EDM radio remixes. Zoe wonders if this music is controlled by the bartender and comes to the conclusion that it must be. "Blonde women love EDM," she thinks. Listening through the beat drops Zoe learns that Lin was gone for a month in Spain teaching children English. The bartender asks how to say,

“That's incredible!” in “Espanol”. Zoe's observations lead her to the bottom of her glass, the giant ice cube ramming into her nose. She places the glass back down on the bar counter missing the napkin and creating a sharp noise against the faux granite countertop. The bartender averts her eyes and makes her way towards Zoe.

“Another one?”

“Please.”

At the end of the bar, Lin runs her finger around the brim of her margarita glass, licking off the remnants of salt from her fingertips. Zoe watches. This image unbeknownst to Lin, angers Zoe. Zoe's body reeks nothing of sensual desire and Zoe knows this. She knows that the mere image of a woman like Lin simply licking her finger would radiate more sexual excitement out of any passing stranger than that of Zoe's naked body. What a joke.

She can't help but imagine what Lin thinks of her, or rather what she would think of her if her gaze happened to land on the purple leather jacket meticulously concealing Zoe's body.

“Is it too much?” Zoe thinks. “I should have worn something that conceals my collarbone.” Zoe scoots herself deeper into her jacket's collar. She starts impatiently scratching the surface of her black dress pants. Her nails make a cracking sound against the fabric every time one of their ragged edges gets caught on a thread. Anxiously scratching, Zoe takes a survey of the room around her. All men, all in suits, all alone, all with a beer.

“Here's that for ya,” says the bartender, sliding the gin and tonic forward. Zoe quickly flashes her eyes and gives a slight smirk, the kind of smirk that says “Thanks. Please feel bad for me.” As the bartender makes her way back towards Lin, Zoe conjures up every reason she doesn't want to be involved in their conversation. “Shallow, sex-driven, petty.” Zoe thinks. She raises her glass to her tongue, swallows her drink in a singular gulp, and stands up. Walking in

the direction of the bartender and Lin, Zoe can feel the hot liquid courage coursing down her throat and into her veins. “I feel good,” she thinks to herself, “Like my whole body is sparkling.” The two women are flapping their hands at one another, mouths agape and moving at something funny. As Zoe stands four feet away she begins to laugh too, throwing her brown hair behind her neck and conjuring up the air to ascend into a conversation of unbeknownst elation.