

Explosion

by Kate O'Hara

I get to watch the sun rise as I walk to work, although usually I am trying to shield my eyes from the light. I always think, "There will be another one just like it tomorrow." I work in a kitchen chopping food with a woman named Tina Marie. She wears corsets underneath her polo shirt uniform and has long orange hair and long pink nails. She chops with me at the restaurant and then walks up the street to The Hole where she tends bar. It used to be called The Watering Hole but the building has fallen into disrepair and its patrons unconsciously shortened the name. Some days I walk over to The Hole with Tina Marie. She is a good bartender and gives me free red beer and always makes sure that I have celery salt, pepper and olives. Sometimes, out of the blue, when she is in the middle of talking to a customer or pouring drinks, she looks over at me and winks. She smiles at me for several minutes before she finally comes over and says, "I got something for you." Then she disappears from behind the bar.

The first time Tina Marie had something for me I thought she had bought me a present. I chugged my beer and went to the restroom. "Lock the door," she told me. "Come in here." I opened up the stall and found her sitting backwards on the toilet herding a line of powder into shape on the toilet tank with a matchbook. "Take this."

The yellow line tasted like metal. "There you go, bitch," Tina Marie said as she left the bathroom. She always says things like that. "You're now a fucked up bitch." The first time she called me a bitch I thought she was upset but, a few minutes later, she smiled at me and poured me another beer. I sat in the stall reading all the messages before going back to the bar and taking shots of wild turkey with a seventeen-year-old girl who, by the third shot, convinced me that I needed to go with her to Church the next day. I told her I would meet her there but I didn't.

When Tina Marie doesn't have to work at the bar, we usually go visit my landlady, Mary Lou. She lives downstairs from me and keeps the whiskey under the sink next to the cleaners- ammonia, Pine Sol and Old English. At five o'clock her other guests start to arrive. They come daily for Friday afternoon club. Everybody brings drinks, everyone but me; Mary Lou buys me wine. Once, I was drunk and described a fine taste to her. Ever since, she wants to hear the descriptions but she never drinks the wine. I told Tina Marie about a bottle of wine I had once that tasted like oranges and coffee. She just smiled at me and said, "Fuck you."

Tina Marie makes my landlady's drinks. Mary Lou holds out her empty glass when she is ready for a refill. Before Tina Marie was around I made Mary Lou's drinks. I would empty the ice tray into the ice bin and then refill the tray with water so there would be enough ice to last the night. Then I filled the glass with whiskey and topped it with water. Mary Lou always said I made it wrong. "There's just two ingredients, right?" I would ask. She would put down her cigarette, fumble off her oxygen mask, and sniff the drink, trying to detect whiskey fumes. The drink was then passed around to see if anyone else could taste the whiskey. After each person examined the contents of the glass they would say, "Oh, this is a good drink," or, "It tastes good to me, but what do *I* know about whiskey."

Mary Lou would take the drink back saying, "Well, I *do* know about whiskey and this a *weak drink*." If Mary Lou was really drunk, I was accused of thinking she was *too*

drunk. “Carol thinks I’m too drunk everyone! That’s okay, I know you are looking out for me, cause I’m *drunk*. Say, Carol’s a Bill Clinton fan. You’re a Bill Clinton fan, aren’t you? I just love him.”

Now, Mary Lou drinks the whiskey and water poured by Tina Marie and says, “Oh, this is *perfect*! I am so glad that you are *a real bartender*.” I still refill the ice trays and put them back in the freezer.

One by one, her guests leave. They go to the bars to two-step with each other and listen to a blues band that plays every night under a different name. When Tina Marie leaves, she says to Mary Lou, “See ya later, Respirator. Don’t explode on us, bitch.” Sometimes I go and dance with Tina Marie. She gets keyed up when I dance because she thinks I look bad. I try to look artistic when I dance. “You are such a dork,” she tells me. I tell her she looks like a stripper. She does too. She takes her shirt off and dances in her corset.

On some nights, after everyone goes dancing, I stay with Mary Lou and fix her drinks. When it is just the two of us, she asks me, “Do you know about my son, Johnny?” I nod. “He was my youngest; he was my baby.”

I listen to Mary Lou bawl wanting to hold the hand already occupied by a cigarette or at least catch the falling ashes. “Johnny was an artist. He was so good. Everyone loved him.”

As a teenager, Johnny had been shot and left for dead by a man he had befriended a week earlier. He recovered in a hospital and then moved away to the west coast with his best friend. A year later he shot and killed his friend and then himself. Everybody has a theory as to why. Soon after, Mary Lou had her first heart attack. When she got out of the hospital, she tried to kill herself, but her daughter found her and rushed her back to the hospital. After telling this story Mary Lou, exhausted from grief and no longer noticing me, takes out her teeth and cries until she falls asleep. I cover her with her blanket and put the teeth in their glass in the bedroom. Sometimes her wig falls back on her scalp and I put it on while I finish the wine and any cigarettes left burning. She sits sleeping- bald, toothless, swaddled. Occasionally I sing her lullabies; I try to make them as sweet as I can. More often I just listen to the soft breathing of the oxygen tank and consider the possibility of explosion.