

Sole Music

by Brett Garcia Rose

"Don't ask me about my father."

You look hurt, but you're not. "Alright," you say, punching out the last syllable.

I nod slightly to Lauren, the bartender, and she brings another round. *Goose, rocks* for me and a colored martini variant for you with skewered blood-red cherries in place of the olives, the tall, fragile glass looking out of place on the scratched wood of the bar.

"So what's it like being a singer?" you ask.

I cringe and pull hard at my drink, shaking the small glass before I put it down so the ice will melt faster. I imagine the many different answers my father might have given, and it makes me angry. Aside from the one hit song that no one seems able to forget, the only good thing he'd done in life was to hang himself in a cheap motel after a road gig with an overdosed teenager. My mother saw the crime scene photos, courtesy of the Enquirer.

"It's like being imprisoned in a soundproof glass jar," I say. "Everyone stares and all I can hear is my own voice."

"Right. How many times have you used that line?"

"Many," I lie.

You smile and slide your chair closer. Empty minutes glide by. My drink gone already, I stare at yours and nod my head at Lauren again.

She comes quickly with more drinks and stares at you until you wiggle and start looking around the room.

When you go to the bathroom you leave your purse open on the chair next to me and I look. Makeup, broken mirror, condoms you may or may not use, miniature tampons shaped like bullets, keys, wallet, pepper spray, tissues, scribbled notes and wrinkled papers, and an iPhone with the pink cover and wall charger in case you get lucky. I always do this, and I always find the same things, and I

always I don't give a shit. Every woman I know has the same kit, survival gear to get through multiple overnight gigs.

You come back from the bathroom wearing fresh lipstick. You wanted me to see the condoms.

"Did you miss me?" You ask.

"Not really," I answer.

"You. Are. So. Cute!" you say, squeezing my leg with each word.

I light a cigarette off the one in the ashtray. My throat feels coated in gravel. "Puppies are cute," I say, blowing smoke in the little space between us. Lauren glances over again, a worried frown shading her face. She's the last woman I slept with, nearly two years ago, before the meds took effect.

"Handsome, then," you say, swiping the smoky air with your hand. "Mysterious, hot. You've probably slept with half the girls in the audience."

"At least," I say, blowing more smoke.

"You're an asshole."

"Yeah," I say. "That's why you like me."

You smile at the insult. "Do you think I'm pretty, at least?"

"Yes," I lie.

I think you're hot, sexy, and ugly as shit. I think you replace your therapist with your vagina like a battery that recharges itself. These bars, these shows, we're our own faltering ecosystem, all of us endangered and in danger.

"Where do you live?" You ask.

"Here," I say. Lauren gives me a harsh look from across the bar that I ignore. "Upstairs."

You scrunch your face and pretend you're not the kind of woman who would chase a guy like me. After several seconds of pseudo-concentration, you lean over towards my side. "I can give you a blowjob if you want," you whisper.

I pretend I'm a little shocked. Lauren comes back with more drinks, setting them down and sloshing half of my vodka onto the bar between us. She leans over, close to my ear. "Asshole." she hisses.

I pretend to be hurt and offended.

I watch her walk back to the other end of the bar and huddle in conversation with my drummer, who I'm certain she's sleeping with. Tomorrow will be our fifth wedding anniversary, Lauren and me, and I wonder if either of us will show up this time.

You lean back in your chair a bit and hike up your skirt to show me that you're not wearing any panties. "Do you like me?" you ask in a little girl's voice. You're on the good side of thirty, probably with a little girl or boy of your own sleeping at home, maybe even a husband, and here you are dragnetting at three in the morning for a loneliness fix.

I pretend not to care.

"I like you more than I hate you," I say. "And I hate you a lot."

I face away from you, watching my drummer lean over the bar and whisper to my wife. Next to Lauren, everyone is ugly.

A couple of more minutes of this and you stand up, angry, and put on your coat in a wide, windy motion. Everyone in the small bar quiets a little and looks at us, even hard-at-work Lauren. "We coulda had fun," you say.

"Yeah," I say. "We could have." I stare harder than I need to, and then turn back to my drink. I pretend not to notice you lingering behind me, unsure of yourself, taking the same damage you always take. Tomorrow you will be a little less, and a little more. The day after you will forget you ever met me. We're all broken, and the scars we trade are all that remains of our fragile, once complex lives.

After nearly a minute you reach around and hug my chest from behind, giving me a long, wet kiss high on my cheek, up next to my ear. "You're gonna be alright, Nick," you whisper.

"I hope so."

I few minutes later the drummer gets up to leave and Lauren brings me another drink and I feel a little less ugly.

