

Like Worship

by Stephanie Austin

I'm thinking: kiss me kiss me kiss me. You're looking over the wine menu and talking to the bartender who urges white, then red; light, then heavy. The bartender is talking about the three S's. Swirl. Sniff. Sip.

"Swallow," I say. "It should be *four* S's"

"Swallow isn't in there."

"You're saying I spit into that thing?"

"Only if you don't like it," the bartender replies.

"I'm going to swallow even if I don't like it," I say.

People in dark corners speak to each other in low voices.

Candles burn. We could all go up in flames.

The bartender keeps asking what you smell and you say: lemons, oak, and pear. I smell lust. We move to the reds. Pinot Noir. Cabernet Sauvignon. Port.

You ask him about the sunny side of the grape. He tells you about muddy vineyards. He has an uncle who runs a place in Santa Barbara and this is possibly the most fascinating thing you have ever heard. You say you've never been around that area, but would like to go.

It will be hard to visit Santa Barbara when you're on the east coast in your big fancy school. We settle on the Cab. It smells like cherries. We take the bottle with two glasses to an overstuffed couch. You pour my glass first. Sniff, swirl, sip. I like the way you watch me. I swallow.

Satisfied, you pour yourself a glass. We could snuggle in close and tell secrets. You could whisper hot in my ear, but you just tell me about this table you had last night. Demanding, selfish people who didn't leave a good tip.

"Kind of like me," I respond.

You hold the glass up to the light.

"What's that?"

"I'm demanding and selfish," I say.

"That's a terrible thing to say about yourself."

You pour me another. The wine glasses sparkle like diamonds. You once said something about buying your future wife a one carat engagement ring because it's all a person needs, and I couldn't decide if you were being cruel or prophetic.

You're smiling the way you smile when we're alone together, when we're a little tipsy and not thinking straight. You put your hand on mine and squeeze like an advance in comfort.

Halfway through the second bottle you tell me it's dumb luck the words "drunk" and "driving" both start with the letter D.

"Alliteration is the oldest trick in the book," I say.

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We creep into your apartment. "Shh," you say.

You put your finger to your lips and tilt your head to the back. There are candles on the coffee table, and I light them. They smell like lavender. I watch the wax puddle around the wick like worship.

"Would it be sexy if I poured this on you?" I ask.

You don't hear me. You're sitting in front of the TV trying to get a movie going. Behind you, the TV screen is black. My body is numb, but my mind is going fast and that's a terrible feeling to have, knowing everything inside can't stop.

"You'll like this movie," you say. "It's really good."

"You're setting me up," I say.

The opening credits roll. There is a song being sung by a group I've never heard of before tonight. It's a song I'd like outside of the movie. I'll go out tomorrow and buy the soundtrack and sing it to you. Alone. In my car.

"I like poems. They're pretty. But do you know why I don't write poetry? I'd be one of those people who uses the ocean as a glaring, obvious analogy," I say.

You laugh and put your hand on my leg. I don't know if you're laughing with me or at me. I don't know what your hand means.

"Do you ever write about the ocean?" I ask.

"The oceans are polluted."

"Aside from that."

"I'm not a writer," you say, turning up the volume to signal me to be quiet. "I just mimic what's around me."

I settle back in the couch that's supposed to be new but feels comfortable and broken-in. You warn me not to spill anything on it. It's not yours.

"What's this movie about?" I ask.

You point forward.

"I want to know what it's about before I commit to it," I say.

I am spinning. Losing ground. Falling away. The images on the screen are frozen. You move away from me and pick up the remote. Nothing changes.

"You can pick out lemon in a glass of wine but you can't figure out how to operate the remote control?" I ask.

You smile. "I'm going to miss you."

"You don't even know me," I say.

You say fuck under your breath. You say that when you're angry, and see, I know that about you. I remember the story you wrote. The one with the grandfather and the cemetery and the girl. The girl is based on your ex-girlfriend. You want to bury her.

Your dialogue is always so smart, so witty. There's a nice balance of showing and telling. I enjoy the voice, though it becomes cold and distant toward the end. Good luck on the revision.

"Got it," you say and the DVD player spits the thing out, then takes it back.

You smile like the devil. Your lips hover in front of mine, and I forget how awful you are going to make me feel. I forget how bitter I will become. I will grieve for you, replay conversations I had with you. You will never get out of my head.

We will speak to each other over the hoods of our cars.

"Will you write to me?" I'll ask.

"I'll write to you," you'll say.

"Just let me know you made it alive," I'll say.

So nice getting to know you these last few months. Say hi to your family I never met. Have a nice life, asshole. I will follow you out of the parking lot and sit behind your car watching your turn signal blink.

Kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me.

