

# Swish

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THEA LIM

*Pendant une soirée qui ressemble à toutes les autres, une serveuse dans un bar, pressée à servir machinalement sexe et alcool, se sent démolie parce qu'elle ne reçoit ni ne ressent aucune sympathie de la part des femmes qu'elle sert.*

We all talk to ourselves. It becomes a habit. When the music is playing, it's too loud to hear us dialoguing softly with ourselves. We repeat orders to ourselves, tell ourselves jokes, console ourselves, abuse ourselves—except for Tammy, who mostly abuses other people in her self conversations. “Fuckin’ cheapass loser,” she whispers to the fridge. “Keep your quarter,” she tells her j-cloth, “you need it more than me.”

Tammy has been bartending for so long that I think most of the conversations she’s held in her life have been with herself. When I listen to her carefully I can hear that her voice has a sort of crazy lilt to it. When people hear someone in the street talking to themselves like that, they walk faster. But when Tammy, when all of us talk like that to ourselves, no one notices. People get used to associating only two things with bar staff like us—alcohol and sex—and it’s hard for them to notice anything else.

Sasha is training a new girl today, and she explains this to her. She says, “In bars there are two types of people: patrons and servers. They look to us for booze, we look to them for cash.” Sasha talks in clichés, as if someone pre-wrote her speech. “So don’t do anyone any favours,” she continues. “We’re not here to babysit, we’re here to pay our bills.” She’s about to finish off with her favourite line—“they’re not people sweetheart, they’re patrons”—when the DJ comes up to the bar.

“Baby,” Sasha coos at him. “The usual?” She is posed behind the bar like a woman in a beer commercial, her breasts hoisted high, her hand easing her shirt up her side to show off her lovely soft skin. The DJ wears his hat so low that all I can see of his face is his mouth. She makes his drink and his mouth bends itself into a “thanks lover.” Sometimes working in a bar is like being a spy. Real names

are rarely ever used.

I fill a pitcher with water and the Javex mix that Tammy brings in every night. “It’s not soap, it’s water and Javex mix so be careful of your clothes!” she tells me each time she sees me using it. She is very conscious of her cleaning product brands. As I am doing this she bounces against my hip at the sink, eager to fill her own pitcher. “I know I cleaned all this last night,” she says, like a soap opera that awkwardly fills you in on missed details, “but you know me, I need to make sure it’s all completely clean!!”

Tammy talks so much about her alleged cleaning neuroses that she has never noticed that I like to clean, too. I take my pitcher to a tall white table, and start at the table’s edge, carefully creating paths of clean among the sticky, dulled surface. Swish, swish. Secretly the cleaning comforts me, because every time I wipe a table I’m assured that there is no mess so big that it cannot be cleaned up.

When I don’t work at this bar anymore, it will not be the electrocuted songs, or the smell of ancient beer and cigarette smoke mixed with sugar syrup, that will bring back the most overwhelming memories of this place, and this job. It will be that swishing sound that reminds me of here, after I have left this job behind. This sound is like our voices and our personalities, always drowned out by music, except at the very beginning and very end of the night.

Leo grabs my elbow and I jump. Water and bleach leap from the pitcher and flow unfettered across the table top, overzealously drowning the scum. Swiiiiish.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” he says, echoing himself, “come and talk to me outside.” He pats me toward the door. His hand is the size of my head, so I don’t protest.

We stand outside on the front entranceway, and Leo sucks manically on a cigarette. He lights one for me even though he knows I quit. I take it from him anyway. The sun is setting, and the cars slide smugly home just as I’m only starting my workday.

“You look good tonight baby,” Leo says, his hand on

my shoulder in a paternal way. I look down at my front. My shirt dips into a deep V and from my vantage point I can see the little pink bows on my bra. "It's peaceful, hey," Leo says, "It looks so damn good in this light that you can forget what a shit-hole this city is." Leo, like Sasha, also talks like a movie character. It is a syndrome with bar staff who crack under the misconceived but persistent impression that this life is glamorous. "It's like the light washes it, washes us ... or something."

Leo likes to talk to me. Before almost every shift he makes me go outside with him and listen to him talk. Because of this Tammy thinks he is in love with me. She thinks I should sleep with him, because he works in clubs all over the city. "He is so much money," she declares in my ear, as if he is a lottery ticket. But I would never date Leo, for lots of reasons. Also, if I ever lay underneath him I'd be crushed to death.

Sasha comes outside to smoke now, too. I slide over to where she is. She smiles at me and says, "You look hot, sweetie." This is a pre-shift ritual, where all bar staff get together and confirm to each other that they look good. We do this before people come in, when we're friends, not in competition. We reassure each other as if preparing to battle an enemy.

Sasha finishes her cigarette as Leo and the other bouncer, Sunny, overlap stories of gore and pummeling until it is time to go back inside. There are already some people sitting at the bar.

"Hello sweet cheeks," one of them says to me, as if we are old friends. I don't think I have ever seen him before. "Hey," he says, "Tell you what. I'll give you a big tip if you let your hair down. I like redheads." He smiles and nods at me, as if we have entered an agreement.

Tammy speeds past me and rams her shoulder into mine as she passes behind me. She never travels anywhere slowly. She stands still for a minute, though her hand is still moving, cleaning invisible counter dirt with a rag. "Now make sure you don't give out any more glasses of water tonight. It just doesn't make any sense, giving out water when we sell it for four dollars."

"I know, but..." I say trying to think of a good argument, "we're made of water."

When Tammy listens to me, to anyone, she always mouths the words I say as I say them, forming little bubbling shapes with her mouth.

"Well just don't do it, okay. We don't need to do any of these losers favours 'cuz they're not going to do anything for us in return. And they hassle me, too, when you give it out to them, and it's a friggin' headache." Her voices rises in irritation as she reaches the end of her statement, and my face and ears start to heat up. Then she turns quickly, her face stuffed with smiles, to the man who thinks I am a redhead.

We have all taken our positions now. Sasha and the new girl are on the main bar, and Tammy and I are locked into our bar on the opposite bank. I can see myself in the

high-gloss mirror behind Sasha and the new girl, but it is almost as if Sasha and the new girl are a mirror too. We all look exactly the same, pirouetting, leaping, and spinning out alcohol.

Suddenly, it seems as if the beer fridges are going to cave in on me. Before Tammy notices, I duck into the bathroom to look at myself, even though the shortest break endangers my tip total. Nothing is different today, but I feel strange. I think about Leo cheerfully recounting his pummeling story; I think about my hair, which is black and not red. I think about charging four dollars for water. I want to splash my face but that will eviscerate my make-up. I take a piece of paper towel and twist it up because I don't know what else to do.

Some regulars bust through the bathroom door. They stop at the mirrors to say hello to me. "Hi honey!" they squeal. "How are you, my baby?"

"She's my favourite," one of them says to the other.

"I know I love her, she's so sweet," another one adds, as if I am outside at the bar.

"You look good tonight, you all right?" a glossy mouth asks me. I stare at the mouth until I feel cross-eyed, and then I smile and nod. I cannot even communicate with them right now, disconnected as we are by the patrons-not-people gap.

A woman pushes her way in between the profuse patrons to get to the sink. It is the new girl, and as she holds her hand under the faucet, the water flowing into the sink turns red. I feel like I might throw up, but instead I hear myself say, "Did you cut your hand?" The familiar sound of my own voice, calm though I am not, makes me feel better.

"Yeah, I think I need—" she doesn't finish her sentence. She looks stunned.

"Let's go get a band-aid from the office," I say. I want to offer somebody something other than alcohol or sex. We open the bathroom door and sprawled out across the floor is a fat mess of bodies moving in the now dark bar. There are bodies even where there are none. Every molecule of air in the bar is populated with someone or something—if not with bodies, then with smells, with voices, with need. Too many people recognize me and it is a novelty for them to see the lower half of my body, usually hidden by the bar. I push the new girl in front of me, nudging her along with my shoulder. I find the office door, sunken into the wall, and we fall through it and into the buzz of the computers and the television.

Ali is watching TV and drinking tea. The World Fitness and Aerobics Championships are on. A woman in a full spandex outfit gyrates on the screen, lying on her back, whipping her legs in the air in a bizarre display of health.

"Whoa," Ali says to no one, "Look at them go."

I find a band-aid for the new girl whose name I still don't know. She leaves the office immediately to get back to the bar, because time is money.

“Whoa,” he says again, “Look at these girls go, strutting their stuff, giving it their all. Whoa.” A woman wearing a glittering headband kicks around the stage, beaming insanely at the camera, chopping her hands in the air. She is not in time with the music because no one has ever written a piece of music fast enough to keep up with her level of optimum fitness.

“So you met our new girl, Cherisse,” Ali says, without looking at me. “Pretty girl. She’ll be some competition for you, eh?” Ali looks back to the TV and slurps his tea. The almost dead plant in the window next to him shakes

I’m going home.”

I try not to listen to her voice.

“Tell me you don’t like it when I do this. Tell me you don’t like it when I do this.” I can see that he is pulling her body toward him, bone by bone. As he sucks her in toward him, she is losing to him. Her head is the last part of her body to slide into him. She turns it just before it reaches his orbit and our eyes meet. I am not bar staff, and she is not a patron. We are just women.

She just wants to go home, and I feel the same way. I reach my hand across the bar, across that organizing space

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**She just wants to go home, and I feel the same way. I reach my hand across the bar, across that organizing space that separates us, and my hand does something meaningful. It grabs onto the man’s sleeve. “No,” I say. “Stop it. She doesn’t want to go with you.”**

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its leaves slightly as vibrations from the dance floor jiggle the office floor. Ali has written “NOT AN ASHTRAY” in black marker and taped it to the plant, even though at this point its soil is beyond rescuing. Ali adores this plant in an unusual way. He fusses over its single leaf for full shifts, but never thinks to water it.

“Where the hell have you been?” Tammy yells at me as I squeeze back into the bar. She pushes quarters and limes across the bar toward the sweaty throng.

“Sorry, sorry,” I yell back at her. We are not yelling out of anger but out of necessity. The music is so loud I can feel it in my spleen.

Tammy takes the east side of the bar and I take the west. A man and a woman are sitting right at the point where the west bar becomes the east bar, right across from the computer where we enter our sales. Every time I report to the computer, I hear parts of the woman and the man’s conversation. It is a conversation I have heard, and had, before.

“I’m going to go home, I’m just going to go home.”

“Stop being silly baby, you know you want to come home with me.”

“Please stop it. I want to go back to my house.”

“Sweets, you’ve had a lot to drink, and you know what you get like. Just trust me, okay? Tell me you can’t trust me.”

“Listen, I told you I don’t want to do this anymore. I know how I feel.”

“No honey, that’s the thing. You don’t. We’ve been through this before. We both know you’ll call me tomorrow, and you’ll want me back. You know you don’t always know what you think. Just come home with me tonight, and we can skip all that hysteria and the tears, and all that stuff you always pull.”

The woman says the same thing over and over again. Each time I pass I hear her saying, “I want to go home,

that separates us, and my hand does something meaningful. It grabs onto the man’s sleeve.

“No,” I say. “Stop it. She doesn’t want to go with you.”

But he doesn’t hear me, because I am still bar staff to him. I lose hold of his expensive shirt. He pushes her forward through the crowd, out of the reach of my efficient hands.

“No,” I say. I don’t want this to happen. I drop shards of glass onto the floor and crunch them under my shoes as I begin to run. I duck under the gate and out from behind the bar and my head rams straight into someone’s bum. I swerve to the side and stand up straight, trying to wind through the crowd. All the people around me seem unbearably slow and stupid and completely incapable of movement. Panic pushes at music for space in my spleen. I lunge forward and trip. An enormous hand catches me.

“Hey little one, where do you think you’re going?” I stare in horror at a bright red face. The face wraps his huge arms around my ribcage. “I caught you, you’re mine.”

“I’m not a fish!” I say, but he thinks that I am being funny and laughs. He opens his mouth and it is like staring into a huge void, full of unknown and horrific smells.

“Let me go,” I push against him. Another wave of nausea assails me.

“I’ve seen you working back there,” he says, as if it is a brilliant observation. “You’re a little firecracker.” He pulls me closer in toward him, so that I am almost sitting on his knee.

“Wanna go out on a date? Wanna see a movie? Wanna have sex?” I am so nauseous that I am almost blind. I push against him one last time, and then I open my mouth and pour everything that I have eaten today into the space that opens up between our bodies. Immediately he releases me.

I don't stay to hear what sort of names he has for me now. The mass of slug-like bodies starts to loosen as vomit fumes rise into the air, and I push and push and push until the cold air of the front door smacks me in the face. My feet slide on my way down the front stairs, and the muscles in my legs clutch at each other in terror, but I keep running—one, two, three more steps and then I am out onto the sidewalk.

I look to my left and to my right. There are big groups of people standing around, but I can't see the man and the woman anywhere. I walk right out to the road to get a better view of the sidewalk. Headlights brush up against me, and my nipples, like embarrassing relatives, appear plainly on the front of my shirt. But I can't find the woman and the man. They are gone.

Leo and Sunny and the cowboy who caught me come pounding out of the club. They are a blur of unnaturally large arms. Leo's fist collides with the cowboy's head, but that is not what I wanted either, and I turn around and pour into the road everything I ate yesterday. Tammy and Ali are pulling me back from the road now, they are patting me with paper towel, and they are pulling me back into the club, which is the last place I want to be.

When I can see properly again, I am in the bathroom with Tammy, and she is holding back my hair while I rinse my mouth. She strokes my back.

"This is not what I want," I sputter, "I don't want to live like this."

"Shhh, shhh. You've been working too hard, honey."

Suddenly I wonder if anyone even knows my real name. "Who is looking after the bar?" I choke, trying to be business-like again.

"Oh Sasha's got it covered. It's after last call anyway. Oh, and Sunny and Leo took care of that asshole. You won't ever have to deal with him again."

I stand up straight, and I look at Tammy and me in the mirror. There is no natural colour in my face, but my make-up and my hair have held themselves together, more resilient than me. Tammy pulls herself up onto the sinks. She leans forward, so that her forehead is almost touching its reflection, and begins to wipe at her lower eyelid.

"You okay now, sweetheart?" she asks.

I want to ask Tammy what are we all doing here, all of us women, trapped in mirrors? How did we get here? But instead I nod.

"Let's go outside. I think your boyfriend is here to pick you up."

The end-of-shift sounds punctuate the bar. I go behind the bar and fill a pitcher with water and the Javex mix that Tammy brings in every night. "It's not soap, it's water and Javex mix so be careful of your clothes!" Tammy cautions me again, like she does every night. I take my pitcher to a tall white table, and start at the table's edge. Swish, swish. My boyfriend touches my elbow.

"Hey," he says, and kisses me on the cheek. I wish he would say my name.

"Are you okay? Ali says you're sick."

I look at this face that I love, and I think of all the things that I could say, of all the things I want to say.

"Are you okay? Did you make good money?" I nod.

"Well then, it couldn't have been that bad, right?" He smiles.

"No," I say. "Nothing happened tonight that was different from any other night."

"Okay, good. I'll be waiting for you outside, okay?" I nod.


He leaves me alone with the cloth and the Javex and the tabletop.

I begin at the table's edge, and I begin to talk to myself. I say, there is no mess so big that it cannot be cleaned up. There is no mess so big that it cannot be cleaned up.

*Thea Lim grew up in Singapore and now lives in Toronto, where she does communication work for two not-for-profits, and is the web editor for the Shameless Magazine Blog. Her writing has been published by The Utne Reader, Shameless Magazine and Second Story Press. Her first novel, The Same Woman, was released this year by Invisible Publishing.*

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