

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Kay Bontempo
At Jimmy's

I met her at a jazz bar on 11th Street, Jimmy's Lounge, though she didn't perform and wasn't working there. She had hair the many colors of a peacock and even resembled one, perched there on the too-high bar stool in flowing layers just as an exotic bird inhabits its perch, content in its world if not belonging. She told me her name was Tequila Mockingbird, a polite way of telling me to leave. I didn't take the invitation. I was ensorcelled even then.

It was raining outside and I was drinking alone, waiting for a guy who hadn't shown. I wasn't altogether displeased; there is after all a beauty in being stood up. I mentally unruffled my feathers and calmed my nerves with gin, but all the while my eyes were on the being seated kitty-corner from me. She kept ordering drinks but didn't seem drunk. You could be sure any guy in that bar would have bought them for her—before tonight I'd never paid for myself there, and I didn't hold a candle to her magnificent strangeness—but she didn't seem to care.

I went over to her and explained the situation. She looked at me with very large moonstone eyes. —Well, why don't we leave, then?

Just like that.

She invited me into her life like she was inviting me to a party. For months I walked the perimeters of it, fragile and strange, sometimes teetering in but never belonging. I learned that she frequented Jimmy's, though we'd never crossed paths before; she had had a temporary fling with the saxophonist, and now she was a fixture there. Once, I was invited into the place where she lived, a place wallpapered in drunken art and carpeted in music. I think it used to be an NYU dorm, illicitly repurposed. Nobody had noticed. She let me sign my name on the wall next to her bed. I wrote a nickname I'd had as a child—if I still didn't know her real name, she wouldn't know mine.

No friendship I had had could have prepared me for Tequila. One minute I was writing papers and combing through my carpet for crumbs the vacuum had missed, the next I was caught up in the whirl and tumult of her nights. I met people she referred to by nicknames—Albie, the poet. Nita, the singer. Barry, who got bad tattoos on purpose. Once, we dropped acid lying on our backs on her walk-up roof, limbs splayed out like two starfish.

—Isn't this the worst place to try this? What if you think you can fly?

—What if I can? she laughed, a sound like a grandfather clock, and rolled over. Neither of us jumped.

If her nights were brighter than mine, her days were darker. Once I knocked on her apartment door to be met only with sobs and curses. I knew I was strictly a backstage figure in her life, the stagehand who pulls the curtain up but never steps in front. I wanted to alleviate the melancholia that made her sit for hours in coffee shops thinking of nothing. But I feared that, happy, she would be just like me. What if, happy, she lost whatever impulse made her talk me into trying on leather pants

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I could never afford and lean in, laughing and encircling my waist with her hands? — You look like a rock star, she'd say, her blue hair smelling like cinnamon. And I believed her. She shoplifted those pants for me from Macy's, something I didn't know about till much, much later.

What else happened that fall? Soon enough I met a guy at that same jazz bar—a trombone player with a loud laugh who, of course, she had encouraged me to talk to—and I began to see her every week instead of every day. The stories she told me lying on her floor on Sunday mornings began to concern people I hadn't met, whirlwind adventures I found myself glad I hadn't experienced. I felt it all rushing away from me, with no sense of how to catch it. I stopped waiting for her to show up when she promised to meet me at restaurants; being stood up by her was different than by a blind date.

Inevitable was the gift-shop postcard I found slipped between my apartment door—of course she knew my address, though she'd never come to visit—with an L.A. postmark, a turquoise feather and no return address. Its words were close to nothing, an all-caps scrawl about how she'd met someone, she'd left town, she'd see me at Jimmy's someday. The trombone player, well-meaning, came out to ask what was wrong, and I probably snapped at him, weeping internally, the hungry bite of loneliness lurking not far off. Bright things burn out so easily, I thought to myself, and wasn't she the brightest thing of all?