

MICHELE KOH MOROLLO

ANOTHER NIGHT OUT

SANDRA DIDN'T KNOW WHY SHE'D AGREED to be Annette's designated driver—again. She didn't like booze—two glasses of white wine and she was ready for bed—so she didn't get the point of bars to begin with. Even the new fancy one at the Marriott had the same musty, sour stench as all the other shitty Galveston dives they went to. She hated that smell. It made her think of false hope and dead dreams.

This place seemed different, though. Moody's was a standalone timber-framed beachside restaurant on Seawall Boulevard with a sea-facing outdoor deck that included a bar, a stage, and picnic tables. It felt more like a family-friendly lobster shack than the claustrophobic, rinky-dink joints that Annette always dragged her to. It also had a soft breeze, and in the early evening light it wasn't half bad.

They were only here tonight because Annette was done with The Old Cellar, their regular place near the surgical glove factory where they worked. After what happened last weekend, Annette decided they should find a new place. So here they were, sitting on shaky driftwood high stools by the bar on Moody's outdoor deck watching The Dusty Spurs tune up for their second set. Behind the stage, the deck's wooden beams framed a scene of a gold-kissed sky with a red sun sinking into the Gulf of Mexico.

The fresh, salty air made Sandra feel good. She'd been living in Galveston all her life but hadn't been here before. She would never have found Moody's if it weren't for Annette. Truth is, she'd probably have no reason to venture anywhere beyond her home and the factory if it weren't for Annette.

Almost done with her third Caribou Lou, Annette, who was now looking a little wobbly in those five-inch platform pumps she'd bought from Walmart, whooped and bobbed along to the band's up-tempo version of "Young at Heart." "Hey, hot stuff!" She hollered for the ponytailed bartender then ordered two shots of tequila and a beer. When the young man came

round with the drinks, Annette leaned forward, rested her elbows on the counter, and squeezed her arms against the sides of her heavy breasts to deepen her cleavage. “Thanks, shug,” she cooed and winked.

The bartender, who Sandra thought looked about the age of Annette’s youngest son, smiled, did a little salute, and then shook his head and chuckled. *Pathetic!* was what Sandra read from the young man’s expression. If she were watching another woman their age behaving the way Annette behaved and dressing the way Annette dressed—tight, muffin-top-accentuating jeans; low-cut, leopard-print silk blouse; orange-red lipstick; and puffed up, spray-stiffened platinum blonde hair—Sandra would probably think the same thing. But for some reason, Annette could get away with flirting like that. With Sandra at least, Annette could get away with anything.

Taking out her compact from her pink PVC clutch bag, Annette began patting her chin and nose. She pulled the mirror closer to her nose and squinted. “Damn, do you see these spidery veins, Sandy?”

“Think people get them when they drink too much. And you definitely drink too much,” Sandra said around an ice cube she was crunching on.

“Oh puh-lease! I’m already drinking less than last year,” said Annette as she scanned the dance floor.

Sandra could see that Annette had that look now—the sort of look she had when they went shoe shopping. She was on a mission.

“Well, hell-low Mr. Fox!” Annette’s eyes were locked onto a lanky, silver-haired man with a Sam Elliott moustache. He was wearing a brown suede Cattleman hat and was seated alone with a beer at one of the picnic tables in front of the stage.

Annette turned to Sandra, raised a mischievous brow, and pointed at the man. “Gonna put a spell on him,” she said. Then she laughed and hopped off her stool. She unbuttoned the top button of her blouse, pulled Sandra towards her, pressed her mouth close to Sandra’s ear, and whispered, “I’m goin’ in,” before stepping back and swaying a little.

Sandra rolled her eyes. “It’s a work night, for Christ’s sake. Put your tits back in. You clock in late again tomorrow, Bert won’t think twice about firing your ass.”

Annette stuck her tongue out and undid a second button, revealing even more bosomy flesh. “Oh, lighten up darlin’,” she said.

Sandra exhaled, puffing out her cheeks in exasperation. “You said one cocktail and dinner.”

“Oh, life’s short! Loosen up, shug. Live a little,” Annette said, cheekily bumping her hip against Sandra’s. “We spend too much time in that shithole workin’ for peanuts. We oughta get our kicks when we can.” She downed the tequilas, fluffed her hair with her fingers, and smiled, revealing small but unusually pretty teeth.

“You’ve got a little . . . just . . . hold it a sec, woman.” Sandra reached towards Annette’s mouth and wiped a smudge of lipstick from the edge of her front teeth.

“Thanks, hon. Alright, I’m ready as can be. Wish me luck.” Annette straightened her back, sucked in her belly, and sauntered in the direction of the fox.

Sandra ordered herself another Diet Coke. The shaky stool felt too uncomfortable, so she stood up, rested her back against the bar counter, and watched Annette talk to the stranger.

As always, Sandra was awed by Annette’s courage, by the way she slinked in a world where everyone else trudged, and by how she could always brush aside the last disaster and do it all over again. Being around Annette made Sandra feel as if she’d had a double espresso. She never felt this way around anyone else—not even her former fiancée.

Sandra had been engaged once, a long time ago, to her high school sweetheart Rob. They’d made out a few times, but Sandra didn’t want to go all the way until after they were married. Rob had been her whole world back then, but a week before the wedding, after all the invitations had been sent out, he broke it off. The next day he left town with Pam, Sandra’s younger sister. There were no goodbyes; she just slipped an apology note under Sandra’s bedroom door that read: “Please forgive us. Love always, Rob & Pam.”

Months later, Sandra was surprised by how much she missed her sister and how little she missed Rob. It made her sick to have to listen, time and again, to her mother, her aunts, the neighbours, and all those other people asking, “Poor dear, how you feeling? I’m here if you wanna talk.” No, Sandra didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t need anyone’s pity, counsel, or comfort. Something inside her had started to rot. At first, she thought it was her pride or confidence. Then one day it occurred to her that what had died was the belief she once had that she was luscious or alluring enough to be seen or loved. As this part of her wasted away, she became more practical and self-sufficient. She steadied herself and pursued peace by becoming the type of person who lived to understand rather than be understood.

She wanted to share some of this peace with Annette, her best and oldest friend. Annette had been married three times but had been single now for almost a decade. Annette's exes had all been wrong for her, each leaving her with more bruises, more debt, and a bigger hole in that place where joy ought to live. Try as she might, Sandra just could not imagine how someone brutalized by love so many times could still have the wherewithal to stay in the game.

The female lead of *The Dusty Spurs* was singing a melancholic rendition of Patsy Cline's "Crazy," and Annette was now slow dancing with the fox. Sandra watched her friend and felt a deep, tender ache in her chest, as if something needed to break free through her ribs. Annette's weight on her, Annette's whisper, the smell of Annette's hot tequila breath against her earlobe, travelling down her neck, made her feel alive, wanted, real.

Sandra looked at Annette as she said something to the man that was making him laugh. Of course he'd laugh. He was in the company of the indomitable Annette. Funny, sparkly, beautiful Annette.

They had been friends since they were kids. Annette was the first person Sandra laughed with after Rob and Pam skipped town. So many times, Sandra had thought of leaving Galveston. But Annette was here, so she didn't. Outrageous, audacious Annette, with her silly smile and her crazy talk. Annette who saw her, who took her to new places, who needed her. She couldn't possibly go.

The fox had his arms wrapped around Annette's shoulders now, and they were headed back to their table. Sandra smiled and sighed in relief. She couldn't bear the thought of Annette being rejected again.

Two weeks ago, at *The Old Cellar*, Sandra had given the middle finger to a group of oilrig guys. There were four of them, probably in their early thirties. They were loud and lumberjack big. When they talked with each other, they would bang their palms against the table and laugh in a way that reminded Sandra of chimpanzees. They were the only other customers there that evening, so after getting nice and toasty on her Caribou Lous, Annette did what she always does. She sashayed over to the men, pulled up an empty chair from a nearby table, and sat down between two of them. "Y'all sound like you're having too much fun. Mind if two little ladies join ya?"

"Get lost you fat, old, ugly bitch!" one of the men hollered.

"Yeah, you gotta be kiddin' grandma, fuck off!" said the other. Then they all laughed.

Sandra didn't know where it came from, but as she pulled Annette away, she yelled, "You assholes!" and told them to "go suck each other off." The men were pink-faced, riled up, and cussing, and Sandra's heart raced as she guided Annette, who had started to cry, out the door. She was afraid they'd come after them in the parking lot, but they didn't.

Later that night, they went to a Sonic drive-in, bought a bucket of chili cheese fries, parked at one of the stalls, and ate quietly together in the car. Still sniffing, Annette told Sandra she almost wished the men had chased them, even if it was just to give them a beating. "You know, I used to have two, three boys on my tail at any one time. I'd have to fight 'em off," she said, a dribble of snot running down her nose. "When the hell did this happen? After I turned forty? Or was it fifty? It's like, you wake up one day and they just stopped coming after you, not to squeeze your ass, not to get it on, not even to teach you a lesson. They just don't care." She shoved a handful of fries into her mouth, and a glob of chili landed on her lap. Sandra scooped it up with a napkin.

The Dusty Spurs were now winding down. Standing alone by the bar, sipping her Coke, Sandra watched Annette sitting thigh-to-thigh on one of the picnic table benches with the stranger. Annette was sucking down her beer, and the man was gazing at her with goo-goo eyes. Sandra prayed he wouldn't get up and walk away. When she saw him move in for a kiss, she almost yelled, "Amen!"

Then suddenly the magic ended. Annette freed herself from Romeo's embrace, her body tensed, and her lips and brows puckered, as if she had eaten something sour. She gripped her belly, bent forward, and vomited on the man's lap.

"Godammit!" The man yelled before storming off. People at the nearby tables looked at Annette with disgust. Most of them got up from their seats to get away from the mess.

Sandra drove Annette home, like she always did. In the car, between nodding off and attempting to hug Sandra, Annette kept swerving around and asking, "Where'd Sam Elliott go? Where's my fox?"

It was getting too dangerous for Sandra to keep driving, so she pulled the car over to the side of the road. Annette slumped onto Sandra and dozed with her head on Sandra's small breasts. Sandra wrapped her arms around her friend and stroked her hair. "He ran away. That's what foxes do," she said. Then she kissed Annette gently on the forehead. "I love you, you silly goat. I really do."