

MY MOTHER TOLD ME NO man is worth crying over," Rose said taking a long drag on her Camel light.

He replied that she was right, thinking that might be the reply she was wanting to hear. He finished off his beer. The bartender pounced on his empty glass and filled it through the tap. It was the middle of the week, there was no one in the bar but them and the bartender. Outside a lazy, fat flake snow was falling and the bar felt warm.

"I told her she was wrong," she said putting the cigarette in the ashtray as if it were a snowflake gracefully landing.

He had guessed wrong about her several times since she sublet a room in his lake cottage two weeks ago. She arrived during the shortest days of winter in brown leather pants with her mutt dog, Harry and a small vial of cocaine. During the previous weeks' bar hopping Rose told him of her dissatisfaction with her life, her current boyfriend and her job plus her role of oldest daughter in a family of nine. He thought he could be that stable man, with the steady job and he could take care of her. She didn't seem interested.

"I think your old lady was right," the bartender said, grabbing Roses' glass, "All men are scum."

He watched Rose laugh. He had come to crave the way her dark eyes flashed and the playful, bemused smile that spread on her full lips. It seemed to him that whenever she looked happy, she looked the part of a flirt. When that happiness was directed toward he felt alive, whenever it was directed toward anyone else, he felt lost and angry.

"How's work?" he said trying to divert her attention back to him.

"Same old, same old. They shorted me hours this week but I don't care. I'm sick of nursing. Lately I've been thinking I got into nursing because I was so used to taking care of my sisters. I don't think I ever had a childhood," she said.

"I know what you mean," Rod said, "My mom always asked me to cheer my brothers and sisters up like I was the camp counselor in an insane asylum."

"I hear you, Rod," she said tapping out the cigarette like someone tapping out a Morse code.

He noticed that everything she did seemed to be in slow motion. He could not tell if this was because she was in the throws of depression or it was an involuntary way of hers to methodically control a world that was forever adrift. Her black hair fell across her face like thick clouds gliding through a moonlit sky, beautiful, dark, disorienting.

"How's your mom?" she asked.

"The same. They just give her morphine to kill the pain. Today they unplugged her. It's a matter of time."

"I'm sorry. I've worked in cancer wards. It sucks. If you ever want to bend an ear, I'm here for you."

He thanked her knowing that it wasn't likely she would be there for him at least not in the way he wanted her to be.

He looked out the window. He hated half-assed snowfalls. He wanted nothing or a blinding, heavy wet snow; something that could trap them in his little cottage for two days, wood stove burning, mutt curled by the fire and the two of them somehow submerged into each other like a snake swallowing its own tail.

With what little courage he could gather, he reached out and held her hand. It was small and incredibly soft like a child's. The flirtatious smile spread slowly across her lips. His heart plummeted to the pit of his stomach knowing he was helpless.

