

Flowers

The night they met, he was working in a pizza bar. Willa shoveled slice after slice in mouthfuls and swept beers into her stomach. She kept pulling her jade blouse up, over her shoulder when it slipped inevitably down, sneaking the lace of her bra into his view. She said hello to everyone behind the bar and in front of the pizza oven. “What’s your name?” an innocent enough question, she’d told herself when the fuzz from the beer fizzled out of her system.

Jen wanted to just order slices to go when Willa asked the men behind the bar—“Can’t we just sit here?”—pointing to two empty stools at the end near the ovens. The guy outside said there’s a wait, but wouldn’t it be ok for us to take these two? Here at the bar? Willa’s voice was quiet enough for him to need to lean over, pulling his face down, slanting his ear and fixing her body in his gaze. “Of course,” he said. “Yeah, sure.”

She’d met every man working in the bar by the time she was through. Jen kept pulling Willa’s elbow, blushing when she turned the conversation with her body to her friend. The list of names Willa built in her head was stacked with people she’d have liked to fuck in the bathroom or in the alley pressed against the old brick.

Tony was top of the list. A tattoo, who’s form she couldn’t distinguish, crawled up his neck just above the collar of his black button down. She imagined if she tucked her nose into his neck and inhaled deep enough she could smell ink and damp copper. His voice rasped at the tip. He seemed surprised when she kept the conversation going, when she fell into his line about swirling the best margaritas she’d ever have into her glass and laughed, mouth open wide, swallowing her space at the bar. His face shot up when she asked for TJ’s number, then swelled

with a smile into the drink he was shaking when she said, “Jen thinks TJ’s hot,” in an aside, just for him.

They went on like this—Willa shouting to the men in the bar, inserting her friend and herself into their space. She demanded their attention, refused to let them just walk by. Willa caught the host, with menus in his hands, a couple on a date following close behind. She pulled him in, tugged a menu by the corner. The couple would wait. Later, he let her talk through the walkie clipped to his collar. She garbled to the security guard at the door. He garbled back. Jen pulled Willa into her body, whispered, “I don’t think I can drink anymore.” Willa nodded, asked Tony, “Can we have the check?”

“You’re not leaving already are you? It’s not even close to closing.” His complaint appealed to Willa in a way she hadn’t expected. She halted, blinked once, twice, three times fast, batting eyelashes unintentionally. Amidst all the noise and booze, she hadn’t realized he was serious. She’d think later about how her husband never entered her mind, how many states away he was in the moment.

“When’s closing?”

“Two.”

“A-M? No way!” Jen shouted in Willa’s ear. Willa shrugged her shoulders, shook her mass of curling waves.

“We’re not walking out the door yet.”

Tony dropped the check while Willa and Jen slurped the final dregs of the night’s revelry from sweating glasses. After he ran their cards, he dropped the signature slips, one for each of them. When Willa reached for the pen, her fingers stumbled over a rose, folded from a black

cocktail napkin. Heat flushed through her cheeks. She curled the rose into the pocket of her jacket when she slipped her arms through the fuzzy holes. She thought she might go without leaving any of herself behind. Jen had already started walking toward the door when Willa turned, scribbled her phone number on the back of the receipt, swept her hair toward Tony, and smiled, once, like placing a finger to her lips and breathing shhh out into the night. On the street, in the damp twilight, Willa and Jen rocked and weaved to their hotel. Willa longed for a cigarette, one long, sweet tug.

When he texted her late that night, she wrestled with herself. She put on jeans and a big jacket. Her thumb found the napkin in the pocket. She rode the elevator down to the lobby, waffled on the sidewalk. She ordered a Lyft. Canceled. Ordered again before riding back to the 11th floor. When she crawled back into the bed, she lay awake listening to Jen's breath watching the rain mist the window, haloing the city's lights.

She left the black napkin rose in a bookstore near Pike Place. When she found the rose again in the morning, she walked through the market fingering the napkin in one hand, sweeping fresh cuts petals in the other, inhaling all the night before contained. She left the black napkin rose on the spines of books whose titles she won't remember, in a bookstore she can't recall. This felt right, to hide something.

He asked for coffee that afternoon but she was already on the train to the airport. She texted her husband, *I wish I could bring flowers back with me*. The black napkin rose never leaves her, there, in her fingers, on that bookshelf, facing the back of the store, waiting for her to find it.