

Rose

I came to know her when I was in my prime, youth defined me. I lived a couple blocks down the hill from her in a large house full of other post college graduates looking to figure out the next step of life's journey. She was 77 and I was 24. Everything about her fascinated me, her sullenness, her slight smile that she could barely muster, her one word replies. Her name was Rose and I was in love. Me, the new activity director at a Healthcare Facility, nursing home, home for the aged – the old. She really wasn't old, not that old, that she should live in this place, but there she was. Rose's space was sandwiched in the middle of 2 other old women. She had a night stand, handed down from resident to resident, when they moved or died, whichever came first. And across from her hospital bed was a bulletin board. This was her home, along with a narrow closet at the end of the room, all painted a sunny yellow. When she dressed and slept she pulled the curtain around her bed, giving it a pull at the end to close the hole that invaded her privacy. It wasn't long after I met her that I quit my job, moved to a city nearby and started my weekly treks by Greyhound to visit her. Rose's history read like the Twilight Zone; they found her in a hotel, with a room full of aerosol bottles – crazy. Upon arrival, she had long hair, dyed red, with a couple inches of gray as evidence of her transition from independence to complete reliance on white smocked nursing assistants, greeting her each morning with the sing songy hello vibrating down the long halls. I brought in the JC Penny catalogs so she could show me the dresses she might like, always the same – v-neck, polyester, with flowers. With the guilt of missing her, I sent postcards every week, on Tuesdays, with any funny picture I could find, in hopes of offering some amusement. Rose pinned them to her bulletin board, each card marking one more week of life in this place where she barely existed. Rose was Italian, so I took her out for pizza on occasion, bribing a friend for her car. I think she took to me, seemed to accept me; she must have wondered why I was so attached to her. When it was time for me to move again, I worried how I would tell her. As it happened, my boyfriend went to visit her and told her of my move, assuming that she knew. The next morning I received a call, she died in her sleep the night before. I was stunned. Since she had no family, no friends and I was the only one to visit her, it fell on me to pick up her ashes from the crematorium. I scattered them around a tree in a city park and carried the container in my trunk for months. It was only after Rose died that the nursing home social worker gave me a box of pictures. These were Rose's people, but I didn't know who they were and she would never be able to tell me. But I was happy to know she had a life – more than what was written down in her medical chart. There were pictures of her dancing, with long red hair, Italian looking people who probably were her parents, various men with wavy 70's hair, wrapping their arms around a much younger and more joyous Rose.