

## *Ruby*

A stranger sped around the mountain. It was a humble mountain, not majestic like the ones near his vacation home in Colorado. His black Audi hugged the mountain's curve, tossing a bouquet of golden leaves into the morning air. Trees lined the twisting mountain road on both sides, creating a tranquil canopy that welcomed him. A slab of weathered ash wood swung from a chain between two stakes along the roadside ahead. White letters painted into etchings upon the unkempt wooden sign read, "Scenic Overlook."

The stranger slowed and parked his shiny car beneath the canopy of trees that had beckoned him. A bed of discarded leaves rustled beneath his leather loafers as he stepped onto the curious terrain. He admired the flashy sweet gum trees, their radiant red leaves ablaze against the myriad of fall hues that now engulfed him. The stranger felt uncertainty sweep into his thoughts. The vibrant, crimson trees that stole his attentions seemed angry and fierce, demanding his humility. He stroked the form folded in his pocket, a tattered print-off with her name typed in the blank line. The sweet gums did not mean to intimidate him. Perhaps they were brave. They stood out from the other trees, brazen and stunning. They sought only to live and

bathe in the sun's warmth. They did not know him, and they demanded nothing from him.

The peaceful sound of traveling waters crooned in the distance. The stranger ambled toward a forlorn stone wall and, upon reaching it, stretched his neck, only a little, to peek at the river below. The beguiling waters meandered along the banks, caressing the tops of smooth stones and cascading obediently along their destined path. He felt its magnetic pull, as he feared he might. But the stranger was wise to the alluring flow before him. Powerful and relentless, the waters entangled many branches and hurled them along without rest or mercy.

A lone bird chirped overhead. The stranger was glad. The charming song of a cardinal drew his eyes upward to the tapestry of a yellow and gold speckled ceiling. The satin leaves of tulip trees dotted the sky above, allowing only fragments of the perfect blue heavens to glimpse down at him. Tall, slender trunks rose far above him, magnificently grazing the distant clouds. Tender shoots stretched from one tulip tree to another, congregating in the paradise beyond him. The stranger felt safe. The embrace of the soaring trees protected him.

Returning to his car, the stranger further climbed the rugged mountain road and the gilded autumn leaves fluttered behind him. Not far from the scenic overlook, he found a narrow,

building jutting from the mountain's wall. A metal roof began at a rocky outcrop above and endured a steep angle down over the building. Patches of the past revealed a once silver finish. Now, the roof was a coarse burgundy, worn rusty by the dauntless breath of time. Cement blocks framed the building. The remnants of a green and blue logo painted on the side wall were impossible to read. The picture had suffered beating rains, severe winds, and unbroken neglect from the building's owner.

A metal sign drooped from the wretched roof, "Cliff's Edge Diner." The stranger smiled, finding the sign to be obvious. He wondered if it foretold of the quaint beings he might find inside the diner. A long window stretched across the front of the building, emitting a warm, yellow glow. The stranger hoped a strong cup of coffee would settle his nerves. A refill might even assuage him for life. He parked at the edge of the building, aside two worn out pick-up trucks.

The stranger's heart stole a beat as he strode toward the diner. He did not belong here. The colloquial twang and spice of added syllables to every word was far removed from his markedly northern pitch. He feared that his correct English would offend the diners as haughty and arrogant. The staff at the children's home had commented on his speech when they gave him the form the

day before. One foot in front of the other, the stranger pressed forward.

An unknown fragrance enveloped him as he approached the door. It wasn't the aroma of sizzling bacon or brewing coffee as he expected. Sweet and delicious, it captured his interest. The stranger turned to find a hearty sassafras tree growing from the mountainside, draping like an old friend over the diner doorway. Its rounded, buttery leaves waved to him with the winds and offered him comfort. The tree was foreign to the stranger. Although he didn't know its name, he wished to pull it from its rooting and take it home with him.

A dusty Christmas bell jingled over the door when the stranger entered the diner. A half dozen booths lined the front window. The pale blue vinyl that covered the booths was dingy and torn in many places, revealing the stiff beige foam beneath the casing. A chipped and graffitied counter stretched out adjacent to the booths. The stranger approached a stool along the bar. A woman behind the counter threw her arm into the air and pointed her finger to the door, "Putcha coat over there, honey."

Her hand offered direction to the metal coat rack in the corner, but her eyes remained fixed on ketchup bottles. She scraped and waited as the ketchup dripped from a nearly empty

bottle into a full one. Her movements were calculated yet mindless. This task was routine for the woman. The stranger hung his black wool overcoat along two others. A heavy tan coat that looked to be made of hide was spattered with oil stains. Another smaller coat was a navy flannel, puffy with warm lining and overwhelmed with the linger of cigarette smoke.

The stranger took his seat upon a wobbly stool and watched as another customer burst through the door and plopped onto his seat at the far end of the bar. "Mornin' Agnes." The woman set a cup of coffee in front of him without a word and went back to her ketchup bottles. The man wore dirty jeans and a camouflage pull over shirt. A thick green vest wrapped around him and zipped near to his chin. His long fingers, outlined in black grease, stretched through the mug's handle and pulled it into his grasp. He slurped the coffee, his thick gray mustache filtering it to his lips.

"Naah." The man rasped in a low voice to himself. He slipped his large, calloused hand into a vest pocket and tugged at a small flask until it broke free of the too-small pocket opening. The man glanced up to the woman, who now stacked napkins under the bar. With the speed and absurdity of a naughty child, he sneaked a splash of liquor into his coffee and scowled as he struggled to return the flask to his pocket. The man

looked up, noticing the stranger for the first time. He smiled, revealing only a handful of teeth. The folds of his cheeks rippled into one another, and the lines of his eyes multiplied as he tossed the stranger a friendly gesture. "Mornin', stranger! How do?"

The stranger smiled and returned the pleasantries. He wondered if the man offered him extra kindness because he had witnessed his misdeed and did not want to be outed. Then again, the stranger had often heard that people outside of cities were kind and generous. The woman returned to him and presented a plastic smile. She looked at him but did not see him. "Watcha want, baby?"

He requested a cup of coffee and took his time drinking it. Other customers wandered in and out as the morning grew into midday. The stranger had another cup of coffee and passed his time perusing an abandoned newspaper. He knew he stood out to the woman as she scurried around frying eggs, buttering toast, and pouring steamy cups of coffee. However, she said nothing. Occasionally, she glimpsed his way from the corner of her eye but she never stopped moving.

The stranger could not determine her age. Wiry gray hairs scribbled their way into a knot pinned at the nape of her neck. Penciled in brows gave her a look of surprise but did not take

away from her sapphire eyes. Her mouth turned down, surrounded by deep lines that hinted at a haunting history. She wore a bright blue sweatshirt that read, Wildcats, in scrolled letters. It hugged the top of her waist, which puckered over her jeans. A pink apron cinched under her breast looked clean and well ironed.

The Christmas bell chimed, and another woman dashed behind the counter. The two women's eyes moved toward one another and just as quickly released. Their faces were stoic and impossible to read. The new woman strapped a pink apron around her waist and approached the stranger as she busied herself tying a knot. "Watcha havin', honey?" She spoke sweetly but did not look at the stranger.

She was petit and middle aged, maybe late forties. Her small frame and girlish voice gave her the appearance of youth. Brown, unruly hair swept into a ponytail away from her face. Long, painted nails clicked along the counter as she awaited the stranger's response. She wore rings on many fingers, but no wedding ring. She smelled of the sassafras tree. The stranger looked into her eyes, bright sapphires, just as the older woman. They were familiar to him, as though he had looked into them every day of his life. He smiled and searched for her nametag,

"Ruby." This was the name typed in the blank on the frayed paper, still in his pocket.

"The one an' only." She smiled a polite, impatient smile.

"Ruby, I'll have a cheeseburger if you don't mind." The stranger was not hungry, but he wanted to stay longer. He had waited a long time to meet Ruby.

During the lunch hour, the tiny diner erupted with voices chattering and dishes clanking. A heavy-set man appeared at the grill and never once turned to face the customers. He stood and flipped burgers, eggs, and bacon without ever speaking a word. His maroon t-shirt hung untucked over a pair of starched blue jeans. A green cap squeezed his head; the thick cloth snap in the back had tiny yellow letters running across it. A shiny, freckled bald spot peeked out from the hat's opening. The remaining hair wrapped around his bald spot from one ear to the other, sheared and a soft white. Occasionally, he whistled church hymns to himself.

The two women raced around one another carrying hot plates overflowing with cheese, onion rings, and sandwiches. Their eyes never met, their shoulders never touched as they swam through the ocean of chaos. Like one unit, they worked their way to serving every customer a hot meal at a rapid pace. Yet, they



moved like strangers, passing around the other as if she were a simple fixture and not a person.

When a new face appeared at the counter, one or the other of the women approached them with a smile and a gleeful greeting. Two elderly men chose a booth behind the stranger. They wore matching khaki pants with careful creases down the front. One of the men was quite round and waddled as he walked. With each passing word, he panted as if he couldn't catch his breath. A slender belt made its way around his waist, magnifying his ample midsection. The other man was thin and casual. A yellowed thermal shirt hid beneath his slick nylon jacket that danced with embroidered horses.

The men enjoyed open-faced hot browns and copious amounts of coffee. Ruby wrote them a ticket and slid it toward the portly, well-dressed man. As she poured their last refills, the breathless, old man reached into his pocket and thumbed through large bills. "Miss Ruby, you got change fer a fifty?"

Ruby continued filling their plain ivory mugs, and without a glance responded, "Now, honey, if I had a fifty, it'd be a change!" The men burst into laughter, the one holding his wallet wheezing and coughing. Ruby smiled and shot a playful wink at them and made her way back behind the counter. Four ladies

crowded into the booth behind the men and prattled over one another.

They all wore hair that was massive and thick with body. The first woman's hair was short and raven black, another blonde and full of curls, another shoulder-length and flaming red, and the last sported a chestnut-brown bob. The stranger glimpsed with curiosity. Their shoes were orthopedic with wide Velcro straps, their pants a palette of polyester hues. They wore loosely knit cardigans, dressy sweatshirts, and dainty gold jewelry. While their hair appeared youthful and voluptuous, their sunken faces were filled with lines moving in every direction. Their eyes drooped with age, but their tender pink lips shined with satisfaction as they lunched.

Agnes approached them with an animated squeal. Her arms flew open in welcome before landing to her hips. "Well, I swany! Look at y'all! I never in my life seen such gorgeous ladies! I tell ya, we've got some real knock-outs in here today! I reckon ya'll must of spent the whole mornin' up at Tilley's shop gettin' your hair done!" The ladies beamed and blushed at Agnes' greeting. They sat for over an hour and picked at hamburgers and side salads and sipped on tall glasses of sweet tea. The stranger knew the glossy locks of hair were all wigs. Agnes must have known it too.

Agnes gabbed with them when she took their order, she grinned as she served them, even patted their backs when she brought the ticket. The stranger watched each time as she turned from their table and the brightness in her face dimmed to quiet angst. Agnes and Ruby both entered into banter and well-timed laughter with their patrons. Likewise, each of them returned to a sorrowful grimace once they bowed from their duty. The stranger wondered what happened to the women behind the counter.

The lunch crowd died to one and the afternoon sun pierced through the diner windows. Agnes untied her knotted apron and stuffed it into a bulky, quilted purse. She stood near the door and watched Ruby wipe down the stained counter tops. Ruby, never looking up, paused as if she were waiting for something. Agnes pulled the small, blue flannel jacket from the hook, "I'll see ya."

Ruby, motionless behind the counter did not look up, "Bye, Momma."

She made her way around the counter and drew the blinds down part way over the windows, blocking the harsh sun. The stranger turned on his stool to watch her. "You ain't from these parts are ya?" Again, her voice was kind, but she did not look at the stranger.

"No, ma'am, I'm not. Is it that obvious?"

Ruby released the cord to the last set of blinds and wiped her hands on her apron. "Ma'am? Lord, when did I become a ma'am? I reckon I am to you, huh. You're a youngin', I suppose. What are ya, 25 or so?"

The stranger fiddled with the napkin in his lap and bashfully confessed, "Actually, I turned 34 this past February."

Ruby, who now arranged the salt and pepper shakers around the tin napkin holders stopped her movements at once. She stood and, for the first time, looked at the stranger. She searched his face and memorized it as if she had been looking for it in every new face she met. With a shy smile, she turned the sign on the door from "open" to "closed" and made her way back to the counter. "We're closed til 4. I gotta make a pie. You wanna stay and keep me company?"

The stranger, too shy to look at her, nodded as he tapped the sides of his coffee cup. Ruby pulled a canister from the shelf and flung a fistful of flour onto the metal table behind the bar. Silence filled the room as the stranger watched her pound out a lump of dough she found in the freezer. Her rings still on her fingers, she smashed her knuckles into the hardened dough until it warmed and flattened.

The stranger, compelled by curiosity, vanquished the silence between them. "You and Agnes, do you two get along?"

Ruby, now rolling the dough with a thick wooden pin drew in her bottom lip, unsure of how to answer the question. "Just the way we are I guess. Been like it so long, just seems normal now, ya know?"

The stranger raised an eyebrow, "Must be nice to spend time together every day. Can't imagine anything so bad that it should drive a family apart."

Ruby thrust the rolling pin into the sink and scratched her forehead with her wrist, holding her powdered fingers forward and away from her hair. "That's right. Ain't nothin' that should keep a family apart. It's a painful thing, a mother and child bein'... jus some things break a soul so bad it can't ever live again."

The stranger's eyes fell down to his napkin once again. He felt guilty for his question. He had not meant it the way that she took it.

Ruby pressed the flattened dough into a glass pie dish and turned to a row of mason jars along the back wall. Her fingers skipped along the jars, "Peaches or cherries?"

Without thinking the stranger, with a voice like a child yelled, "How about apples?"

Ruby turned and grinned, "Well, apple pie is my favorite!" She grabbed a burlap bag and pulled out a few red apples, tossing them to the stranger, "Here, get on around here and make ya self useful!"

The stranger rounded the counter and took deep breaths to still his trembling hands. Ruby slid the crust into the refrigerator and handed him a pink apron. He laughed and tied it on with fumbling fingers. Ruby watched as he peeled the apples and offered guidance in correcting his clumsy technique. "What brings you to these parts anyway? Watcha lookin' for?"

The stranger worked the knife's blade into the skin of a new apple. He hadn't determined why he came. As for what he was looking for, it was more the matter of who he was looking for. "Well, I haven't figured it all out yet. I guess I came for... love."

Ruby scoffed and looked away, "Love? Phft."

Undeterred by Ruby's disdain, the stranger continued, "Oh, come on, Ruby. Hasn't love ever compelled you to do something senseless? Something you couldn't explain, even to yourself?"

Ruby's eyes widened. She knew too well the meaning of that kind of love.

Her face darkened, and he lost her to a deep and painful memory, "I loved someone once. More than anything. Ain't a day that goes by I don't think of him and try to imagine his face and what he might look like now." She snapped back into the present and slid a splintered cutting board in front of the stranger. "No use in dwellin' on it. He wouldn't remember me. Doubt he even knows I exist." She showed him how to core and slice the apples into small cubes. "That's an awful fancy car your drivin', you must be doin' well."

"How did you know that was my car?" The stranger did not expect an answer as Ruby's face twisted and caused him to think again. He felt silly, having already forgotten that he did not belong here. He remembered the pick-up trucks alongside his Audi. He thought of the working-man's coats hanging next to his Italian Chesterfield. He lost some of his glee as he considered these things.

"I'm a physician." The stranger said the words but then wished he had not. He wanted to tell Ruby, but now he was embarrassed.

Ruby scooped a pile of cinnamon from a canister and sprinkled it onto the apple squares. Her face brightened at his words. "What kinda doctor are ya?"

Relaxing, the stranger handed Ruby a spoon to stir the mixture. "I'm an obstetrician. I get to welcome new life into the world every day. It's pretty magical."

Ruby, eyes fixed to the bowl of apples, stumbled over words she didn't know how to order, "You got any little babies of your own?"

The stranger wiped his hands and placed them in his pockets. He rolled his tongue into his cheek and gulped, "My wife and I are expecting our first around Christmas. It's a girl."

Ruby fought to contain her excitement. She put the mixture of lemon juice, nutmeg, sugar, cinnamon, and apples into the freezer and pulled out the remaining dough. "You wanna help me make the strips for the top?" The stranger stepped back to the counter and mashed the dough as he had seen Ruby do earlier. "You gotta name for your little angel?"

The stranger, pounding away at the dough looked only at his hands, "I don't know, how do you like Ruby?"



Ruby laughed and turned away, looking for something necessary to grab. She needed a moment to tame her eager heart. She taught the stranger to slice even strips of the flattened dough. They poured the apples into the pie plate, and Ruby allowed him to brush the pie with egg before latticing the strips over the apples. The stranger loved apple pie too. But he was too full with emotion to feel hunger. "Ruby, what happened with you and Agnes?"

Opening the oven door, Ruby slid the pie across the steaming rack. She did not know how to answer the stranger's question. "Some things happen and they hurt ya bad. So bad, that hurt gets all hard inside and turns to hate. Agnes made decisions for me when I was too young to make them myself. To protect me, I know that. But I can't forgive it. Reckon I can't forgive myself, really."

The stranger placed his hand over Ruby's hand, his distinctly sapphire eyes searching out hers. "Ruby, life is full of difficult decisions. Sometimes we lose things that we hold dear, but it doesn't mean that all is lost."

Ruby studied the stranger as he spoke. She saw her father's lovely, straight nose. The wave of his hair, the furrow of his brow were all too familiar. She had dreamt of this young man's face since she was fifteen years old. It was hard to believe he

stood before her now. "Forgive yourself, Ruby. Forgive Agnes. A mother deserves that."

Ruby's eyes blinked back unyielding tears. She did not know what to say to the stranger, but she hoped he would feel what she felt. Relieved by the startling knock of a regular, Ruby realized it was 4:00. She wiped her watery eyes and found a tissue for her nose before rushing to unlock the door and turn the sign to "open."