

DAKOTA ROSE

It had snowed a little on the way down from Rapid City—flurries—but the wind moaned out of the Black Hills and onto the plains. It was only October. My truck, a '92 Chevy, hadn't had heat in it for three years, and even with gloves on my hands were cold. I'd been on the road from Miles City since noon, so the neon motel and restaurant sign of the Dakota Rose, skimming out of a low gray sky, looked friendly. I needed a cup of coffee and a look at the highway map.

Inside, I didn't take off my coat. My body was a trembling reflection in the window, and I didn't think the shivering would stop even with a hot shower. As soon as I sat down, the waitress came over, a smiling blond. "We have a special on hot buttered rum," she said.

"Coffee," I said.

"The special's two fifty," the waitress said, as if I were someone she knew.

"Bourbon with the coffee." I said. "Thanks."

Two Sioux were at the curve of the bar and three businessmen at the far end. A couple in western polyester, maybe motel customers, sat in a booth on the other wall from me, and at one of the tables in the middle, a group of older women were drinking rum and cokes. Outside was a mostly empty parking lot, and across the highway was a truck stop called Maverick Junction.

A man lurched past the window where I sat and across the parking lot out to the highway going west to Hot Springs. He glanced back once at the window but kept walking—the same man I'd seen earlier trying to hitch a ride outside of Rapid. I'd felt bad not giving him a lift. It was dusklight then, and snow drifted in front of the red Maverick Junction sign.

I realized Maverick was the place Jessie and I stopped last Christmas, coming back from her sister's in Scottsbluff. Jessie had played one of the poker machines, while Mardy and I shared a chicken-fried steak.

"Why doesn't Mama eat?" Mardy had asked.

“She doesn’t want to get fat.”

We’d eaten the chicken-fried steak and gravy and waited for Jessie to finish losing her forty dollars in the machine. I thought Mardy at four already knew things I didn’t.

A car came up behind the man on the highway, and he turned and stuck out his thumb, but the car didn’t stop and the red tail lights receded into the snow that whisked across the road. The hills beyond, already yellowed by fall, were tinged now with white.

The waitress brought my cup of coffee and the shot of whisky and set them on the table. “Four dollars,” she said. “I gave you the special price.” She had a nice figure, slim, and her blouse was cut low to make the cowboys tip. “Staying here tonight?” she asked.

“Scottsbluff.” I said. I got out my wallet and pulled a ten from the money I’d brought in case the truck broke down. “Give me four back.”

She made change for the twenty. “Not very good weather to drive,” she said. “You want anything else?”

I shook my head.

I didn’t know what would happen in Scottsbluff. I was going to see Jessie and try to get her to come back with me to Miles City, where Mardy was with Jessie’s mother, but in the circumstances, I didn’t have much leverage. She’d run off with a man named Wilferd White Deer, a Crow she’d met at the agricultural extension agency where she worked. Wilferd had taken her to the motorcycle rally at Sturgis in August—so Ray Koontz told me, who knew Wilferd—and they rode out to California. For more than a month I didn’t know where she was, until finally Wilferd showed up in Miles without her. I figured Jessie was at her sister’s, so I’d called there.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Lois told me. “She’s all right, got a job here.”

“She’s my wife,” I said.

“That doesn’t make her want to talk to you.”

“What kind of work’s she got?”

“A pretty good job at McAllister Feed.”

“Doing what?”

“Counter person. She doesn’t want any money from you.”

“I don’t have any to give her,” I said. “What about Mardy? Mardy misses her.”

Lois didn’t say anything for a second. “I don’t know, Chris.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said. “I didn’t hit anybody. I didn’t drink. What’d she tell you? She goes off with Wilferd, some guy she barely knows, and I’ve been trying to find her for weeks.”

“Don’t do this, Chris. Don’t go and make trouble.”

“I want to know when she’s coming back is all. Mardy and I. . .”

Lois hung up. I didn’t blame her. She couldn’t say much since Jessie was her sister, though maybe she could have said the truth.

I poured the whisky into the coffee and added some sugar and took a sip. The burn went straight to my stomach, and I sipped again. It was still bitter. I opened the highway map and looked out the window. It was darker and snowing hard. The snow blew in wispy sheets along the highway. The man wasn’t there—I guess he’d got lucky and caught a ride—but out of the corner of my eye I saw a movement. A girl was crouched down between two cars parked in the second row from the window. She looked maybe fifteen or sixteen, dark-haired, no hat on, and wrapped in what looked like a ragged sleeping bag.

At first I thought she was trying to steal something, but she didn’t try to get into either of the cars near her. She huddled down out of the wind and was bent over as if she were writing something. I couldn’t tell. I checked my truck a little way down the row. It was unlocked, but nothing in it was worth stealing—a duffel bag with some clothes and a pillow and a blanket for sleeping wherever I ended up. The girl saw me watching her, and I took another sip of coffee and whisky and unbuttoned my jacket.

The room was warming up. I flattened the map on the table, found Maverick Junction, and traced the highway east. It was three hours to Scottsbluff, maybe more if the snow kept up. On the map, it looked as though you couldn’t get there from here. You had to go southeast to

Chadron, Nebraska, then straight west on U. S. 20, then south again on county roads. I remembered driving down for Christmas through all the farm towns, Jessie drinking in the front seat and Mardy in the back of the cab singing and talking to herself. I didn't like it when Jessie drank in the truck, and it wasn't good for Mardy to see her. In the end, I guessed people did what they wanted to.

Jessie was the daughter of two schoolteachers from Ohio who'd come west to work on the Fort Peck Reservation. From the start, she was an outcast there, a white girl with reddish blond hair, with two parents interested in causes. Jessie got into arguments and fights, and finally her father had sent her to a Catholic school in Billings, which was worse. She'd got hell from the nuns for not doing her work and hell from the church when she did her work and blasphemed. Jessie hadn't ever much liked the idea of God.

I memorized the map, and in a few minutes the waitress came over. "Another one?" she asked.

I stared into the near-empty cup, then at my watch, then outside at the snow falling and falling. "All right. Please."

As soon as the waitress left, the girl was there again, this time closer and a little farther over behind. I had to glance over my shoulder to see her. She didn't turn away or hide. She smiled at me, a hard halfway kind of smile you might give someone who's told you bad news or maybe to someone you wanted something from, a smile that didn't last long. The wind gusted around her, and snow stuck in her hair. She was pretty in a way, smooth skin, round face, dark eyes. She looked Indian.

No one in the room was paying attention to me. The waitress was at the bar, waiting for my shot of whisky and talking to the businessmen, and the women who'd been drinking rum and cokes were putting on their coats to leave. When I looked back outside, the girl had moved closer still and held up a piece of paper. I couldn't quite read it. Snow had smudged the letters of one words, but I made out next to it "\$15."

I looked away quickly. I'm sure I'd read the sign right, at least the intention. Sweat beaded up on my forehead.

The waitress brought the coffee and whisky. She didn't have to tell me how much, and I paid with the four ones. At the same time, I thought I ought to get on the road.

The girl outside, of course, had seen me drive up alone in the truck. She'd seen my Montana license plate and must have watched me get out and come inside. She'd seen me order and the drink arrive. She knew everything she needed to know about me.

I wasn't much of a drinker. Once in a while Ray Koontz and I watched Monday Night Football in a bar, or, over beers, we'd talk farming or shoot some eight-ball. Out at the trailer I didn't drink very often. Work started early every next morning—irrigating, carrying pipe, more irrigating, taking care of cattle, cutting hay, plus last summer I put in a new pivot sprinkler. I drank the whiskey straight down and sipped at the coffee.

Wilferd wasn't the first man Jessie'd run off with. Spring two years ago, she'd gone to Great Falls with Gary Whitlow, an ex-con cattle buyer out of Wolf Point. One of Jessie's friends called me. "She went to a movie, Chris," the friend said. "She won't be back tonight. But I thought you ought to know she's all right."

She was gone three days. She said she'd been drinking and hadn't seen any reason not to go. "I can think of two," I said, but that was as close as I got to arguing. I was glad to have her back.

Several pairs of headlights turned into the parking lot and funneled through the snow toward the half-dozen or so parked cars outside the window. Two pickups and a Dodge van pulled in. The trucks parked beside one another, and the van with a couple in it ran in under the motel carport. I didn't see the girl anywhere, which was fine with me.

It was dark then, and the lights from Maverick Junction appeared brighter now, but farther away through the snow. A semi-trailer coming north pulled off into the gas station.

I drank another swallow of the coffee, folded up my map and put on my coat. Then I got up

and went to the bar intending to ask the bartender about the girl. Did the manager of the Dakota Rose know she was outside was what I was going to ask, but when I leaned in toward the lights above the liquor bottles, the two Indians at the curve of the bar stopped talking and looked at me as if I were going to confide some secret.

“What do you need?” the bartender asked me.

“A pint of Jim Beam,” I said.

I took a twenty from my wallet, and the bartender put the Beam into a brown paper bag. I got a five and two ones back in change and left the ones on the bar.

In the lobby, I crossed paths with people coming into the bar. Apparently the couple in the van was registering at the motel because the man was at the desk, while the woman was reading the restaurant menu. “You coming from north or south?” I asked her.

“West,” she said. “From Sheridan. We didn’t get much snow until the Black Hills.”

“I’m going south,” I said. “You hear a forecast?”

“It’s supposed to clear by morning.”

“Thanks,” I said. I walked to the double exit doors and waited there a minute. The arc light outside sprayed a magnified sphere into the snowy air, and the wind whirled in all directions. Not weather to drive. I thought I ought to get a room, too. I had no great rush to get to Scottsbluff, except I had to get back to work in a couple of days.

I didn’t see the girl. Maybe she’d moved on or had got into the warm backseat of the van. Or maybe she was a schoolgirl who thought it was funny to tempt tourists. When she’d made her joke, she took out for home.

I got out my wallet again and leafed through the bills. I’d brought almost two hundred dollars for gas and parts if the truck broke down. No matter what, if I’d made it to Scottsbluff, I was giving half to Jessie. I pulled another twenty. If the girl appeared again, I could spare that much, not for favors, but to let her buy a meal and get out of the cold.

I uncapped the pint of Beam, took a swallow, and went out.

The cold surprised me, though I knew it was coming. The wind burned my bare hands and slithered down my sweaty back. I crumpled the twenty in one fist and with the other hand fished in my jeans' pocket for the truck key. To my right were the motel rooms where a few cars were parked in front of the doors. I turned the other way, away from the light, and walked along what must have been a sidewalk under the smooth snow. Inside, my cup and saucer and shot glass had been cleared away, and it was as if I'd never been there.

I shielded my eyes from the snow and scouted between the cars for the girl. A little way down, I cut through the first row of cars toward my truck. Snow had covered the windshield so I couldn't see inside, but that was where she had to be. Around the door, the wind had blown her tracks clean.

I jerked the door open, ready to be angry, but she wasn't there. The interior of the cab was graylit from the arc light and the snow on the windshield. My duffel bag was still on the folded blanket on the seat. I got in and stuffed the twenty into the ashtray. With a cold hand, I fit the key into the ignition.

I closed the door and pulled on my gloves. The engine caught, and I switched on the headlights and wipers. The snow fell away in two arcs, and there she was in the headlights, standing right in front of the truck with snow sifting down all around her. Her hair was wet and stringy, and the snowflakes made silver beads of wet. What I'd thought was a sleeping bag was a torn coat. She turned her back to the wind, still holding her sign with an invisible hand pulled inside her sleeve.

For a moment I thought of Mardy, at my mother's in Miles City, watching TV in the den with the lace curtains on the window. Maybe it wasn't snowing in Miles. Maybe it wasn't snowing in Scottsbluff, either. Jessie would be getting off work, heading to a bar. I turned off the headlights and the wipers and left the engine running.

Without the headlights on, the snow disappeared, and the snowlight made the night gray and smooth. From nowhere, the heat came on in the truck. I felt it surge from beneath the dash

and rise under the windshield. The snow falling on the glass melted, blurred, bled down. Heat rose around me like an aura, and outside the wind snapped at the girl's coat. She looked at me, and I leaned across the seat and opened the side door.