

He sat in the dark truck and watched her through the window.

An early spring breeze drifted across his face and played with the dark brown hair that brushed his forehead. Despite the cool air, his cheeks were warm and his calloused hands clammy.

Inside the restaurant, Rachel moved from table to table chatting easily with customers, and he followed her with his eyes. Already, her gestures were familiar to him – the tilt of her head as she listened, the way one brown eye almost winked just before she laughed. They'd touched once for just a moment, but he knew the feel of her skin and her scent – a blend of spearmint gum and some woody perfume he'd never smelled before. He watched as her hair, the color of corn silk in August, curtained her face as she leaned forward to clear some dirty dishes, and he imagined reaching up to brush it behind her ear.

A sudden pounding on the back of the truck startled him out of his fantasy.

“You comin' in or what?” Rusty shouted as he passed with a bag of trash for the dumpster. Nick nodded and waved, then followed Rusty inside. Rusty turned to him.

“Haven't seen you for a week, and now you're lurking in the parking lot like some weirdo. You stalking someone?” He winked, then slid behind the counter.

Most of The Rusty Nail's tables were filled with families having a night out or old couples sipping their after-dinner coffee and watching the muted news program on the large screen TV on the back wall. A couple of the regular drinkers were holding up the far end of the bar debating the dubious merits of the Cubs and the Twins, the closest things Iowa had to a local team. But it was Rachel who held his attention, moving away through the crowded tables.

“Yo. Nick. Beer?” Rusty asked, waving an empty beer glass.

Nick nodded and pulled his eyes away from Rachel. "What's on the menu tonight?"

Rusty snorted. "What's on the menu?" he mocked. "What is this, Chez Louis? When's the last time you ordered anything but a burger? You don't come here for the food, handsome, and everybody knows it."

Nick shot back, "Maybe I'd like to see a menu for once. You know, be treated like a real person instead of your wife's kid brother or the hometown James Dean."

Rusty slid the now foamy glass across the counter and put both hands on the bar, giving Nick a long look. "Touchy tonight. Fine. The gentleman would like a menu. Shall I have the steward bring a wine list as well?"

"Forget it," Nick said. He took a long draw on his beer. Rusty lifted one eyebrow, then headed to the kitchen, leaving Nick to stare at his own reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Gray circles surrounded his grayer eyes. He hadn't shaved since last weekend. He'd put on clean clothes, but it hadn't helped – he still looked like he felt. *Shit*, he thought.

Beneath the baseball debate and the laughter, he could hear Miles Davis on the sound system, the lonely trumpet providing the ideal soundtrack for Nick's mood. Rusty had to be the only person in Iowa who still thought jazz was cool. When the dinner crowd thinned out, Rusty would no doubt switch the CD to Cannonball Adderly or Bud Powell "to jazz up the party," he always said. As Nick listened to Miles' sorrowful version of "I Fall in Love Too Easily," his fingers absently rubbed the pitted wooden bar. Decades of graffiti carved on its surface stood out in relief, reminding him of the hours he'd spent here marking time. It occurred to him that a few lines on a bar were the only marks he'd made in his twenty-four years.

Rusty pushed through the door from the kitchen and placed a hot platter in front of Nick. "Spec-i-al-ity of the house, mon-seur," he said, with a grand wave of his arm. "Ze fish and ze chips, in honor of ze season."

Nick raised his empty glass, motioned for another, and looked at the greasy meal. As he picked at the fries, he glanced occasionally at the mirror, watching Rachel move through the room. Even when he wasn't looking, he could follow her voice. Each time he heard it, his stomach flipped the way it used to when he'd drive fast over the railroad tracks coming home from school. About a quarter mile before the crossing, he'd floor the old Chevy until it hit the dip in front of the tracks, when the car would go airborne, his stomach lurching against his insides seconds after the tires hit the ground. He'd loved that mildly nauseating thrill when he was seventeen. It didn't feel so good now.

Pushing his plate away, Nick looked up to see Rusty watching him.

"Bad day, Nick?"

"Something like that."

Rusty leaned back and crossed his arms, his head tilted and a frown creasing his forehead.

"What?" Nick asked.

"If I were less familiar with your past," Rusty mused in a bad British accent, "I would surmise that you are suffering more from an affair of the heart than from a difficult day at the office."

Nick played with his glass instead of looking at his brother-in-law. "You've been watching too much BBC-America again, Rusty. You really oughtta balance that with some Bruce Willis or something, get your testosterone pumping a little stronger."

"Ah, me-thinks thou dost protest too much," Rusty retorted.

Nick lifted his head and watched Rachel in the mirror again. Rusty followed his gaze, his mouth opening in silent surprise. He leaned over the bar.

"Does this mean you're not paying me the twenty bucks you owe me?"

"Shut up, Rusty."

"I'm just asking. If you got the elusive Rachel to go out with you, you deserve that twenty. That was the deal. Hell, she hasn't given anybody else the time of day in the six months she's been here."

Nick sipped his beer and continued to watch Rachel. Rusty looked over at her, too.

"Hey," he whispered. "I leave town for a few days and she breaks your heart? What happened, man?"

"Nothing happened."

"So what's up?" Nick didn't answer. "Snap out of it, man. She's not your type anyway. Rachel's sweet and everything. But not your type. You know what she told Denise the other night? She said she's not interested in dating anyone 'who isn't worth marrying.'" Rusty made quote marks in the air as he spoke. "Her exact words, swear to God."

Nick closed his eyes. Rusty was right. But what if he couldn't convince his heart of that? God, he felt like a Jackson Browne song. *What if it's true, what my heart says...* True or not, it sounded ridiculous when anyone but Jackson Browne said it. His thoughts returned, as they had so often over the past few days, to that night last week.

"Why are you always trying so hard, Nick?" Rachel had asked. Rusty and Denise had taken the kids to the Twin Cities, and Nick and Rachel were closing up The Rusty Nail in their

absence. Nick had been working on Rachel all night, hoping to win that twenty dollar bet by the time Rusty returned.

He stood behind the bar, one hand still wiping the taps, the other resting on the edge of the counter.

“Relax. I’m not interested in playing that game,” she said. She came over to the bar and stood in front of him, waiting in silence until he raised his eyes to meet hers.

He felt himself flush and started to turn away, but Rachel reached over and held his wrist.

“I see you in here all the time, Nick. It’s not the beer or the girls. I can see it on your face when you’re with Rusty and Denise. *That’s* why you spend so much time here.” She paused a minute, until he looked into her eyes again. “You want what they have.”

He pulled his hand away and put on the casual routine again. “Nice try, gorgeous,” he said, then knelt down to check the tap lines so she couldn’t see his face.

“I’ve been there, Nick,” she said, just loud enough for him to hear. “It’s harder to be honest. I know. But it doesn’t leave you with that ache inside.” She turned and went back to her cleaning.

He stood and watched her, Jackson Browne singing in the background, *There’s this loneliness springing up from your life, Like a fountain from a pool*. Taped to the mirror beside the cash register, photos of Rusty and Denise’s kids – and the kids with Uncle Nick – revealed the truth of Rachel’s words. He wanted someone to belong with. Not just another date.

Nick looked over at those photos now, and he knew Rusty was right. Rachel was too honest for him, she saw him too clearly. And it scared the hell out of him.

“Hey, Rusty, can you get me two drafts and a Perrier?” Rachel said over Nick’s shoulder. He froze, then forced himself to relax and take another sip of his warm beer. “Haven’t seen you for a few days, Nick. Where’ve you been?”

“Miss me?” he asked, aiming for casual but not quite managing it.

“You’ll have to stay away longer than that,” Rachel teased. She took the drinks from Rusty. “But Rusty’s missed you. He’s only had us to torment in your absence.” Nick could smell her perfume and feel her breath on his cheek when she leaned closer to stage-whisper in his ear, “He makes me listen to Frank Sinatra after we close. I hate to admit it, but that ‘70s stuff you picked was better than ole blue eyes crooning ‘Wee Small Hours.’”

She left with her tray, and Rusty raised his eyebrows at Nick. “You helped her *clean*?”

Nick shrugged. “I was trying to get her to go out with me, remember?”

“Sounds to me like you were trying to woo her.”

“Woo’ her? Who says that?” Nick asked, watching Rachel in the mirror again.

“You want to ask a girl out,” Rusty said, “you flirt a little maybe. But you want to woo her, you buy her flowers. Or you pitch in and help her with her work. That’s why they call it ‘pitching woo,’” Rusty laughed at his own joke. “You, my friend,” he said, pointing at Nick, “crossed the line. All bets are off now.” He waved a hand and moved to the other end of the bar.

Nick looked his reflection in the eye and raised his glass in a toast before downing the last of his beer. *Way to go, Nick*, he thought. *This is gonna cost you*. He reached for his wallet and stood to leave.

“Turning in early?” It was Rachel. “See, I knew you weren’t the irresponsible cad everyone said you were.” She stepped behind the bar to fill a glass at the tap. As she flipped her dark blonde hair back from her face, Nick noticed a delicate blue gemstone sparkling in the

cartilage at the top of her ear and a tiny tattoo on her neck, just below her hairline and too small for him to identify the image.

Its existence surprised him and, almost without thinking, he said, "You're not the perfect little girl everyone said you were."

She glanced at him, and he gestured toward her neck. She reached up to touch the mark. "We all have a past." She dropped her gaze and picked up the tray. "Where you're *going* is a lot more interesting – and more important," she added as she walked away.

Nick followed her with his eyes while she delivered the drinks and stepped to the next table to remove some empty plates. *Yeah*, he thought. *But how you get there is pretty interesting, too.* He caught the glint of that jewel in her ear when she turned her head, and then their eyes met. He held her gaze, and she blushed, suddenly shy. His stomach flipped again, but this time he didn't mind.

"Nick, Nick, Nick," Rusty said behind him. "You're in over your head, my friend."

Nick removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and tossed it on the bar.

"What's that for?" Rusty asked.

"The food. The beer. The bet. Call it whatever you want."

"You giving up?" Rusty replied, reaching for the money.

"Yeah. You could say that." Nick walked over to Rachel and leaned close. His lips close to her tattooed neck, he whispered, "No more games."

Then he walked out to his truck to wait for her.

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