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Rose Park

Rose Parker dreamed of far-off places. Paris, studded in lights; Rome; Venice; canals with clothing lines taut and full. When she was a little girl she begged her father to fly her over the Atlantic Ocean and take her anywhere with an ancient, crumbling building or a strange language to listen to as they walked the cobbled streets. He steadfastly refused. He was a working man; he couldn't imagine the desire to board a plane and remain on it for more than a few hours. They took short vacations every summer to national monuments: Zion, the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore. Hearty, young America bored Rose.

Her father died as she approached thirty, leaving behind enough hoarded change for Rose to go anywhere, finally. But thirty was old, and more than enough years for him to instill in her the importance of work and frugality, patience and responsibility. She was married and pregnant and Harold, her husband, had struggled to find regular work.

Instead of traveling to places exotic and colorful, she opened a coffee shop in the neighborhood she was named after and resigned herself, significantly, to the work of surviving the rest of her life. She gave birth to a son, Joey (not Joseph), and two years later, a baby girl, Amanda,

followed. The coffee shop struggled until it thrived and forty years later Rose was still there, listening to the entrance bell ring six days a week from sun up to sun down. Her husband was long dead and neither of her children possessed an ounce of desire in taking over the place.

She ran her shop with the help of a consortium of ever-changing college students and middle-aged vagabonds. None stayed for long except the ones who never left. A particularly talented latte artist named Tanner worked with her one summer and through Christmas, when he went home to visit his parents and never returned. Unlike most of the young college students Rose employed, Tanner appeared bright. He worked his shifts without complaint and rarely called out sick, a word Rose knew meant hungover or still drunk from the night before.

Rose caught Tanner staring at a customer one Thursday, his expression oddly threatening. He realized she was watching him stare and told her, "I think that guy is casing the place."

The man Tanner was watching fidgeted. He was young, African-American, wearing baggy pants. He had a grey hoodie on, the hood hung over his forehead and eyes, with long sleeves that nearly swallowed his hands. Rose noticed his face roving from one end of the store to the other.

"Leave him alone," she told Tanner, "Don't bother anybody and nobody will bother you."

"You should ask him to leave. He looks dangerous."

"Tanner, I've lived in this city for almost seventy years. No one scares me anymore."

He shouted out a drink. A young girl bounded over to the counter and smiled at her vanilla latte, where a foam frog smiled back at her. "This is the best one yet, Tanner."

Tanner grinned. "Thanks."

Thanks, Rose groaned internally. She looked over and examined Tanner's gold-tan skin, his green eyes and well-groomed blonde curls. Sure, she admitted to herself, I'd fuck him, but I wouldn't tell him thank you afterward.

The man walked to the far side of the room and picked a coffee mug off the display cabinet. He flipped it over, looking at the price tag, presumably. Tanner's observance of him thickened, milk to roux.

"Tanner," Rose said, "If he tries to take off with that mug, chase him down. Guard my eight-fifty with your life."

Tanner rolled his eyes and swirled a wet rag across the counter space under the espresso machine. "You know you're old, right? How many nights a week do you close this place by yourself?"

"Four."

"This city isn't like it was when you were younger."

The man put the mug back on the shelf where he found it, took a final look around the coffee shop, and left.

"Really. Please, tell me what's different than when I was young."

"You know what I mean."

"Black people have lived here for a long, long time, Tanner."

"Don't you still say 'oriental'?"

Rose laughed. "I try not to. My granddaughter nearly ripped my head off the last time we went out for Chinese. Just slips out sometimes."

"There you go. You're as racist as the rest of us."

Tanner picked up his soiled rag and two others nearby it. "I'll go get some fresh ones," he said.

Absorbed in the quiet of Tanner's absence, Rose eyed the empty space left by the hoodied man. She sighed and walked into the lobby, picking up leftover straw wrappers and dirty napkins from tables as she went.

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The man returned a few weeks later wearing the same hoodie and, Rose assumed, an expensive new pair of shoes. It was early on a Wednesday morning and Rose was working alone. When she first saw him amble in, a ripple of fear washed over her. He wasn't the kind of customer Rose usually saw more than once. Her clientele rested center-left: well-dressed on weekday mornings, in flannel and tight jeans during afternoons and weekends. They came in and walked to the register and addressed Rose by name. Rose hated her status as a neighborhood institution but appreciated the consistency. She liked knowing what to expect. The man disrupted her routine, and in turn, her calm.

He began by looking at the mugs again, turning them over one by one.

"I don't hide anything under those," she quipped.

The man shot his eyes over, his neck barely moving, annoyed.

"They have cracks sometimes. Can't see 'em from the top."

"I refund for damaged merchandise."

"That's what everyone says before you pay."

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Do it cost money to breath in here?"

“That’s a good idea.”

The shop never stopped reeking of burned coffee grinds and spoiled milk. The man breathed in deep and the morning’s espresso grinds, molding in a nearby garbage can, seemed to shoot through his bloodstream. Rose caught something in his eyes that flickered so briefly, she couldn’t name it.

“Rose Park,” he said, “Weird name. Why is this place called Rose Park?”

“That’s a funny story.”

“Yeah,” he coughed into an open palm, “I bet it is.”

“Well, my parent’s moved here when I was two. My name’s Rose Parker and they just happened to move to a place called Rose Park. I liked the coincidence enough to raise the stakes and name this place Rose Park’s Coffee and Tea. Rose Park for short.”

“This is Long Beach.”

“What?”

“You said this place is called Rose Park,” he waved his arms at the street outside the storefront, “This is Long Beach.”

“Long Beach is the city. Rose Park is the neighborhood.”

“Neighborhood?”

“Lots of areas have neighborhood names. Wrigley Park. The Arts District. Willmore. Belmont Shore.”

He shook his head. “Only fancy places get special names. I live in Long Beach.”

Rose knew, instinctually, that when he said ‘fancy’ he meant ‘white’. Happily liberal and graciously inclusive, she didn’t begrudge his sentiment.

“Gimme a hot chocolate,” he said, reaching for his wallet.

“You want an espresso shot in that?”

His eyes narrowed and his mouth crinkled into an incredulous frown. “No,” he scoffed.

“I love espresso in hot chocolate,” she told him.

“Oh, I certainly believe that.”

A few moments later Rose handed him a hot chocolate one size larger than he paid for. He stayed in the lobby, eyeing the pastry case for a few minutes before leaving.

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Winter swept in a month later. Rose wore scarfs and mittens as soon as the temperature fell below seventy degrees, imagining her sweating body was somewhere that rotated through more than one season. Business at the coffee shop picked up like every year as waves of teenagers billowed through for peppermint flavored anything. Rose closed the shop alone one Wednesday, her usual routine for the slowest night of the week.

At eight forty-five she crouched down on her creaking knees and began plucking muffins out of the pastry case. The front door opened; the bell chimed. She drew herself up slowly, listening to heavy feet come toward her. She found someone standing in her lobby in a pitch black jacket, a beanie pulled over the face with holes cut out for the mouth and eyes.

“Open the register,” said a voice she recognized immediately.

She walked over and started hitting keys.

“What the fuck is taking so long?” he said. He pulled a gun from his pocket, laid it and his hand on the counter inches from the register. “Open it. Don’t try anything funny.”

Rose stopped one click away from opening the register and looked over at him.

“I don’t blame you for doing this, you know. I keep hearing about how my generation ruined this country. Tanked the housing market, destroyed unions. And Reagan, Jesus, did I really vote for that cowboy twice?”

His hand shot off the counter. He thrust the gun forward, gripped on both sides, it’s barrel mere inches from Rose’s right eye.

“Did I ask for your fucking life story?” he screamed. “Shut the fuck up and open the register.”

The room contract around his voice. Rose felt the walls coming in as she looked into the dark mouth at the barrel of the gun. An entry into the abyss, the farthest of far away places: just large enough to fall through and never look back. Rose harbored no silly illusions about Gods or afterlives. She looked at him and saw that same flicker in his eyes as before. It burst out now instead of fading away. The look was one of hate, so thick and hot she could almost feel it crawling into her, only it didn’t flow away from him, it turned inward, doubling back and building upon itself. His arms shook, making the gun twitch.

“Give me the money, you stupid bitch! What the fuck are you staring at?” Spittle flew off the corners of his mouth. His eyes held hatred, surely, but fear as well. Only a desperate man screams with a gun in his hands.

Rose set a stack of crinkled bills on the counter. “Getting shot in the face,” she said, “Shit, that might be an awfully big adventure.”

He shook his head, scrapped the money off the counter, and ran out the front door.

Rose didn’t file a police report. She never considered it. The incident was one of the most exciting moments of her life. To run and give the secret away would dull it’s edges. In

stead she held onto it like a houseplant, a secret child. She watered and fed it felt it slipping over her fingers like hot sand.

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Tanner stood over a newspaper a week later, two days before he'd leave for home and never return.

“Woah,” he said, stabbing a finger into the front page, “Rose, come here.”

She looked at him from the register but didn't move. “What?”

He held up the newspaper and pointed to a small, blurry photograph. “I think this is that guy who was here a while back, the one you told me to stop staring at.”

Properly interested, Rose walked over and confirmed it was indeed the same man who only a few weeks before had made off with roughly two hundred and thirty-seven dollars out of her cash register.

“Apparently he got shot trying to break into someone's house up on Willow. Police shot him through the chin and blew half his face off. I guess that's what you get being a gangster.”

“You know Tanner,” Rose replied, “You're really quite a dumbass. Not everyone is meant to get up and stare at the same four walls every day.”

Light fell in through the windows, giving everything around them a sickly, unbending glow. Mugs glittered in the display case, along with cracked cups on tables, spoons strewn about the room with bits of coffee dried on their ends. Rose looked at the things she owned and wished she could melt them down, alchemize her worthless money into bullets and bones. Turning to face backwards was, she knew, a foolish enterprise. She looked through her corner of the earth with a hope of new faces and new worlds.